

## INDIAN CAVE

By Bob Bradley

### Chapter One THE WAREHOUSE CAPER

I was perched on the wall of an old warehouse along the railroad tracks in Carrville, Texas. The August sun cooked the Texas hill country like a side of beef on the Fourth of July. A bead of sweat rolled out of my overgrown burr hair and sliced a gully though the grime on my face. I blinked, but the grime and sweat filled my right eye. I wanted to wipe it but was afraid I'd fall and break my neck.

We were looking for Nazi spies, which was a noble cause in 1943, but Carrville was in the middle of the Texas hill country. It was hundreds of miles from where spies could be. Plus, we were eleven and wouldn't know what to do with a spy if we caught one. Any fool knew there were no spies in Carr County, but my friend Dougie was no ordinary fool. We were best friends or worst enemies depending on what day it was.

We had known each other since we were little kids and were always in trouble. The Baptist preacher said we were a bigger menace than the Germans and the Japs put together and in 1943 that was pretty bad; all because we got caught taking a dip in the First Baptist church baptismal.

I didn't want to look for spies. I wanted to go swimming in the Guadalupe River. Dougie got it in his mind if we found a spy the mayor would forgive us for shaving his cat. I knew the old fool wouldn't forget what we had done to his prize Persian and we would just get into more trouble. But here I was stuck on this warehouse like a hungry

tick on a fat dog. He thought we could catch a spy like James Cagney had caught James Mason in the Sunday movie. I tried to explain to him that James Mason wasn't a real Nazi spy and we weren't in the FBI. But Dougie wouldn't listen.

Dougie inched along the base of the warehouse which was practically on the tracks. I wasn't afraid of the daily train from San Antonio. I wasn't even afraid the cops would catch us. The daily train wasn't due, and the cops were taking a nap in an empty jail cell. I was terrified the station manager might catch us. Not that he'd do anything to us, but he would tell Mother and she was fed up with me getting in trouble.

Dougie grabbed the next windowsill. He made enough noise we were sure to get caught. We always got caught.

I dropped to the ground.

"Come on, Burr," Dougie said. "This is a German spy place. We got to collect evidence so we can turn them in to the FBI."

The little voice in my head told me to run. Run away from Dougie Masterson. Mack the **secondhand** man said me and Dougie were trouble magnets, and Mack was never wrong.

I crept to the alley and glanced up Washington Street. If I took off running, Dougie might not catch me before I got to my tree house.

"Burr, if you don't come up here with me, you'll pay." His voice quivered, but I couldn't tell if it was from fatigue or anger. In either case I knew Dougie would catch me and beat me up. We fought all the time and he most always whipped me. I gave up and rejoined him on the side of the building.

I prayed for some disaster to give me a chance to avoid the coming trouble. My

Commented [JM1]:

bad luck held. There wasn't an earthquake, and the Japs didn't bomb Carrville. Dougie clung to the side of the building and panted like a busted steam engine. He nodded at the dirty windowpane.

I strained to see through the crust of dirt, but all I could see was some trash on a desk in a small office and a filing cabinet. The office door to the rest of the warehouse was closed. I didn't think it was a German spy place because the German people I knew were neat and clean. They wouldn't be caught dead in a place that dirty.

"See? There it is!" Dougie said. "The silver seal on the desk." He clutched at the window frame to keep from falling.

I scrubbed on the window and leaned my face against the glass. A silver hand seal lay in the pile of garbage, but I couldn't tell if it was a Nazi seal like in the Sunday movie.

"See? See!" he yelled.

Old Man Bauer turned from watering his zinnias across the street. I prayed he was so nearsighted he couldn't identify us. He'd been mad at me ever since I rode his milk goat through his flowerbed. It wasn't my fault the stupid goat didn't know gee from haw.

I couldn't figure out how to get out of this mess without getting into a fight with Dougie. "Yeah, I see the seal, but I can't tell if it's a Nazi seal or not."

Dougie swelled up like a stepped-on frog. He reached for me but had to grab back onto the window frame to keep from falling. "It's the same seal as the one in that James Cagney movie last week." He pointed with his nose.

If I argued with him, he would blow up. If I agreed and we went to the cops, they would find out this was another of our ridiculous schemes. They wouldn't put us in jail;

they'd call my Mother. I shuddered in the ninety-degree heat.

What choice did I have? Dougie was here and Mother wasn't. "Yeah," I said.

I hoped that would satisfy him without firing him up about this spy business any worse.

"Let's go tell Officer Morris!" he yelled and dropped to the ground.

I clung to the wall hoping Dougie would get distracted. Dougie had the attention span of a moth. If I could delay him, maybe he would forget all about the Nazi seal and I could get him to the river where it was a lot cooler and a lot safer.

"Let me see if I can detect a Swastika," I murmured.

That was the wrong thing to say. He turned and ran between the buildings, shot off up the alley and down Washington Street. "There's a Nazi spy in one of those warehouses by the tracks!" he screamed louder than a fire engine on the way to a fire.

I jumped to the ground and trotted after him. So much for outsmarting an idiot. Someday I was going to learn not to think so much. Dougie claimed it came from me reading too many books.

Mr. Bauer dropped his hose and yelled, "What was he saying?"

"That Nazi's lie," I answered and sprinted after Dougie. I wasn't sure Mr. Bauer would appreciate me saying any German people lied.

I turned up the back driveway to the fire station and almost fainted. Dougie had Officer Morris out on the porch of the city jail yelling at him. This was double trouble. Officer Morris didn't like to be yelled at and Dougie had to have waked him from his morning nap. It would be much better to interrupt a bull alligator at feeding time than to wake Officer Morris from his morning siesta.

“There’s a Nazi spy over in a warehouse by the railroad track.” Dougie’s yelling had waked the firemen from their naps and now we were in worse trouble.

Officer Morris wiped the sleep out of his eyes and blinked at Dougie as if he were a bad dream. He said “What are you talking about? A Nazi spy by the railroad track?”

Dougie threw up his hands in frustration. “I’m telling you there is a Nazi spy in the warehouse over by the track. We saw a Nazi seal and a German flag and a picture of Hitler.” He nodded his head for emphasis. “Ask Burr.”

What had been a minor mistake now was taking on unmanageable proportions. I could hear Mother yelling at me now and calling Uncle Jessie in Hondo. I hated Uncle Jessie more than Churchill hated Hitler. Mama had threatened to ship me to stay with him for the summer if I got in any more trouble.

“Is that true, Burr?” Ever since I had saved the school from blowing up, Officer Morris believed whatever I said. I wanted to keep it that way, but I saw Dougie waving his hands like a busted windmill in a norther. I suppose that was his signal for me to back him up.

It was time to fish or cut bait. If I fished, I took a chance of getting into trouble with Mother and if I cut bait, I was certainly going to get beat up by Dougie.

“He’s scared after seeing all the Nazi stuff,” Dougie explained.

Dougie glared at me as if to warn me he was going to beat me up bad.

“Well, Burr?” Officer Morris growled. The heat was making him madder and madder. Officer Morris seldom got out in the sun from June to September. Some people claimed he was a summer bat or a vampire.

What the heck, there might be a Nazi in the building. But if I didn’t back Dougie,

what kind of friend was I? At least I wouldn't be the beat-up kind. "Yeah, it looked like it could be," I said.

Dougie jumped up and slammed both feet in the deep grass that surrounded City Hall. "Burr."

Officer Morris shook his head. "You and Dougie are telling different stories."

Chief Eckstein stepped out onto the cement porch and blinked. "What is it, Walter?"

Officer Morris walked to the bottom step and glanced over his shoulder like he was discussing the next Marine landing in the Pacific. I had no idea those two men could talk so quietly. The words spy and FBI drifted over the noise of the traffic on Main Street.

"Burr, I...", Dougie started.

I raised my hand to quiet him and inched toward the two officers.

Chief Eckstein said, "We've got to check it out. The FBI says the radio signal is coming from here in Carr County. They're broadcasting to U-boats in the Gulf of Mexico, giving them weather reports."

I leaned back to Dougie. It wasn't one of his half-baked schemes. There really was a spy in Carr County.

Officer Morris's laugh reminded me of a hand-wringing cartoon villain. "Come on, you boys. You had better be telling the truth. Not like the bank robbery money last year."

## Chapter Two

### BURR MEETS THE FBI

I leaned back in the back seat of the police car. My mind was unable to accept a Nazi spy in Carr County. That didn't happen in a quiet little town like Carrville. Chief Eckstein had said that the spy was radioing weather reports to the Gulf of Mexico to German U-Boats. Why did they want that information? I couldn't figure it out, but if Carrville's two officers had talked to the FBI about it, then it must be true.

I did recall a lot of army trucks around town for the last few weeks. The excuse had been maneuvers for the landing in Europe. I was so busy looking at the soldiers and their equipment, I didn't question why they were in a hick town two-hundred miles from the ocean to practice amphibious landings.

"They got a radio and everything," Dougie was saying. He had gone from a seal to a flag, a picture of Hitler and now a radio transmitter. If Officer Morris didn't hurry and get there, he would have a Panzer tank in the warehouse.

"I bet they've got a Panzer in there, too" Dougie said, like he was reading my mind. The truth is he couldn't read much of anything, which just goes to prove I know how he thinks.

Officer Morris slowed. "Did you see a tank in there, Dougie?" Officer Morris's voice sounded cold and flat.

Even Dougie with his limited intelligence backed down. "No, I didn't see a tank, but I bet they could have one."

I wanted to bury my head in the back seat but the odor stopped me. I reached for a door handle but there was no door in the back seat of a two-door, 1940 Ford. And no crank for the window, either. That had been removed to keep criminals from escaping out

the six inches it could open.

I stretched and looked out the window. I was trapped with an insane idiot in the back of a police car. I didn't think Mack was right. I wasn't a trouble magnet; I had bad taste in friends.

Officer Morris stopped in front of the building and pushed his cap back on his head. "You sure this is the building?"

Dougie looked back at me for confirmation. I watched Mr. Bauer and hoped he didn't tell Officer Morris I had ridden his milk goat through his zinnia patch.

"Yeah, this is it. Isn't it, Burr?" Dougie reached for the door handle like he was going to run and leave me with a mad 300-pound cop. And I wasn't the one who woke him up.

I glared at Dougie and shook my head.

Officer Morris opened his door of the patrol car and stepped out. We followed him out and walked between the warehouses and up the steps to the porch.

"Dougie Masterson, do you know who owns this warehouse?" Officer Morris exploded.

I inched to the edge of the porch and calculated if I could beat Officer Morris off the steps to freedom. From experience I knew he was a lot quicker than he looked.

Officer Morris saw my play and blocked Dougie and me from escaping.

"It's in there, isn't it, Burr?" Dougie backed behind me.

I squinted up through the sunlight at Officer Morris and decided there were three possible outcomes in this caper, and all were bad. Mother would send me to live with Uncle Jessie in Hondo, Dougie would beat me up, and now I had to contend with Officer



Morris. We called him Man Mountain Morris when he wasn't listening. When he was listening, we called him sir.

"It looked like a seal that could be a Nazi seal. Dougie saw the other stuff." I inched behind Officer Morris in order to avoid retaliation from Dougie.

"Burr, you worm. You know you saw the same stuff I did. He's chicken, Officer Morris." Dougie's words ran together like a team of mules.

Officer Morris pushed us apart. "Do you know who owns this warehouse?" he demanded again.

I felt like the time that Mrs. Smith asked me to work a math problem in front of the class. The problem was easy enough, but the pressure froze my brain like a blue norther. I had been humiliated.

"Yeah, Hitler," Dougie jeered.

Officer Morris walked in a circle as if this might give him a chance to make sense out of it all. "Do you know this is Mr. Pierson's warehouse?"

Dougie said, "So?"

Officer Morris said, "Well, he's one of the richest men in Texas."

I stepped back from Officer Morris. I had never seen Mr. Pierson, but along with Mr. Skinner who owned the bank and a lot more, they were the richest men in the world. There was no way Mr. Pierson could be a Nazi.

Dougie swelled up and glared at Officer Morris then at me. "Maybe the Nazis are using the warehouse and Mr. Pierson doesn't know about it."

Officer Morris grabbed me with a hand big as a catcher's mitt. "You boys are the biggest troublemakers in Carrville. No make it the worst boys Carrville has ever

produced.” He lifted us both up by our necks and dragged us down the ramp to the police car.

From across the street Mr. Bauer yelled, “Them is the boys that rode my milk goat across my zinnia bed.”

Officer Morris whirled on the old man. “Mr. Bauer, I’m sure they did. They’re behind all the trouble in Carrville. I’ll take your complaint later. Right now, the FBI wants to talk to them.”

For the first time since I have known Dougie, he shut up. His hands trembled and he turned white around his mouth. He tried to swallow but his mouth was too dry. I knew because I was having the same problem.

On the trip to the warehouse, I had looked out the window, but now I scrunched down in the seat that drunks had peed in and didn’t care.

The ride back to the police station was the shortest three blocks I had ever ridden. Officer Morris pulled the Ford under the pecan tree and jumped from the car. It is frightening to see a 300-pound policeman jump from a patrol car and take the steps up to the police station like a frightened mountain goat. I knew if Officer Morris was in a hurry either there was a big problem or Muller’s bakery had just turned out a new batch of doughnuts.

“Do you think we could get away?” Dougie asked.

I leaned over and whispered, “If you try to run, I’ll tell everyone you kissed Maybell Sampson in the movie last week.”

Dougie’s eyebrows shot up. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.” I glared.

I could see him weighing the discipline we were going to get against the entire school knowing he kissed the ugliest girl in seven counties.

He turned and opened his mouth.

“Demmie will be my witness,” I said. I knew the only boy he was truly afraid of was Democrat Watts, the biggest boy in elementary school and bigger than most junior high school boys. And to make matters worse, Demmie collected snakes.

Dougie just sat there and chewed on the inside of his cheek. Anytime he chewed on his cheek and didn’t talk he was scared.

Officer Morris and a Yankee stepped down the steps to the patrol car. I knew he was a Yankee because he had on a coat and tie in August. Perspiration rolled down his face like water cascading over Town Lake damn.

“You boys get out of the car,” Officer Morris ordered.

The Yankee stepped back to allow the car door to open. As he moved, I could see why he wore the coat. A shoulder holster held a revolver under his right armpit.

Chief Eckstein and officer Morris had their guns in holsters on their hips all the time. Ranger Purvis had a .45 automatic on his hip, but this man had a revolver in a shoulder holster like the movies.

Officer Morris said, “Boys, this is Sam Tullar. He’s an FBI man and he wants to talk to you.”

I knew it was serious because Officer Morris was talking quietly. The only time I had seen him talk below a bellow was earlier in the afternoon when he discussed the FBI with the chief.

I hated Uncle Jessie but living with him looked better than being arrested by the

FBI for treason. Officer Morris had threatened us and now he was turning us over to the FBI.

Sam Tullar said, "Boys, this is important. Are you both patriotic Americans?" His voice was smooth as Mr. King's honey.

We both nodded, too frightened to speak.

Agent Tullar said, "I'm going to trust you boys with a secret. For security reasons we need you to not talk about any of what happened today." His honey voice took on a sterner tone, which made me think there was a stinger if the honey didn't work.

Officer Morris stepped in. "If I hear of you boys talking about this I'm coming after you."

I fought the urge to laugh at the image of Officer Morris climbing up to my tree house. Then I grew somber when I figured out he could shake us out of it.

"Yes, sir," I blurted.

Dougie found his voice. "You can count on me, but Burr is kind of a sissy and like a girl and you know how they talk."

I didn't care if he could whip me. When we got away from the FBI and the cops, I was going to bop him.

The stupid fool FBI agent leaned down and talked slow like I was some dumb kid. "Why do they call you Burr?"

I glanced at officer Morris and swallowed my first response. "My daddy said I was like a chuckle burr in a mule's tail. Not good for anything. Just waiting to stick the mule and make trouble."

Agent Tullar glanced at officer Morris as if to ask what that meant then shrugged.

“How about that, Burr are you like a girl?”

“No, sir. Dougie’s a little retarded and you have to discount anything he says.” I knew that would guarantee a fight, but I didn’t care. My honor was at stake.

The FBI man whirled in a circle like he had just tried to explain how an airplane works to a hick from up at the head of Bolyn Creek.

Officer Morris turned to him. “That won’t be a problem, sir. If they talk, I’ll tell their mothers.”

Neither the FBI nor the local cops frightened me like my Mother. I could run and hide from the cops. There was no place to hide from Mother. She knew everything.

The Yankee FBI man leaned down and dripped his sweat on me. “The secret is that the army is holding maneuvers up here in the hill country.”

Dougie’s mouth dropped open like he had the answers to an English quiz. “Maneuvers? Are they going to test secret weapons?”

Agent Tullar glanced at Officer Morris and winked. “Yes, secret weapons. That’s why it’s a secret.”

Dougie’s mouth opened like a baby bird squawking for its dinner. I nodded like I agreed but crept toward the open space between the police car and the station. If I got half a chance I was going to run for the river. This situation had worse possibilities than getting Mrs. Butt for fifth grade. Daddy said they shot traitors and Dougie was so stupid he’d tell the Germans about the maneuvers that geek Agent Tullar said he was trying to keep a secret.

Officer Morris glared at me like an eagle looking at a mouse. “How about it Burr, can you keep this information confidential?”

I stopped inching. "I sure will keep it quiet. I'm a patriotic American."

I prayed that they wouldn't call my Mother. I could handle the condescending FBI agent, and Officer Morris was dumb as a sack of hammers. Mother, on the other hand, was smart as a tree full of owls.

Agent Tullar reached in his pocket and pulled out two business cards. He handed one to each of us. "This makes you honorary FBI agents. If you tell the secret, we will have to take them back."

I glanced at the card knowing Dougie would be telling all of Carrville about the secret weapons they were testing. He talked like his tongue was loose on both ends and the more confidential the information the faster he told it.

"We may need you boys to scout for us. Stay where we can find you." Agent Tullar smiled at Officer Morris like a cat after he's eaten a fat mouse.

Dougie and I walked into the fire station and looked at the cards. We were the proud owners of passes to the officers' club at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio. That Yankee must have thought we couldn't read. I tossed it at a trashcan and slumped against the wall.

Dougie grabbed for the card faster than a duck can catch a June bug. "This is an official FBI membership card," he said. "You have to take care of it."

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and wondered how he found his way home at night. "It's a guest card to Kelly Air Force Base Officers' Club."

Dougie read the card and stuffed it in his pocket with the one he had. "That's code."

Without speaking I walked up the hall to the water fountain by the city hall. I

could hear Agent Tullar talking through the open transom. “We have to find that radio. An SS Colonel has escaped from a POW camp in South Texas and has been reported heading for Carr County. He may have knowledge of the plans for the invasion of Europe. No matter if he knows about the plans or not if he gets back to Germany, we will have to change our plans. That would delay the invasion another year and cost millions of lives.”

“Why so long?” someone whose deep voice I didn’t recognize asked.

Agent Tullar said, “Tides, weather. If we don’t hit the right time, the invasion could fail.”

Texas Ranger Purvis, who I recognized immediately, spoke. “We know the general area where he is, but he only transmits for a brief time then shuts off. When we search that area, he’s vanished.”

The big voice asked, “And where is the area?”

Purvis said, “The eastern part of the county. Golf Course Road and then back to the town of Easy.”

“Do you need more men?” the big voice asked.

The Yankee FBI guy said, “The locals are curious now. If they find out there’s a spy in their midst, they’ll start shooting everyone who moves.”

Purvis said, “We’re lucky they haven’t shot some of your soldier boys.”

The man with the deep voice said, “Don’t tell the local cops about the Nazi SS officer. If that got out, we would have a second front right here in Carrville.”

Feet shuffled and I could hear a door open. Officer Morris and Chief Eckstein’s voices mingled with the other three. I sprinted down the hall and out of the fire station.

Dougie was still studying the “official” cards as I ran by.

“Wait! Where are you going?” he blurted.

I ignored him and dropped to the firemen’s mumblypeg ground. I kicked away the broken matchstick from the last game the firemen had played.

I dug out my knife and pegged it into the bare ground. Dougie dropped beside me. “You know I can beat you and make you dig out the peg with your teeth.”

“Shut up and start pegging,” I said.

Dougie started swelling up, but Agent Tullar and Ranger Purvis stepped out on the porch. They were followed by a short bald man with more ribbons on his chest than a prize pig at the county fair. The general spoke to Chief Eckstein with the biggest voice I had ever heard. I pegged my knife and almost stuck Dougie’s hand but he was too engrossed with the general to notice.

The three men walked down the steps and stopped. “That the boys?”

“Yes, sir. I conned them with a couple of passes to the Kelly Officers Club. They think they’re honorary FBI men.” Agent Tullar chuckled.

The general laughed so loud he woke two firemen sleeping in the ready room.

That fat, bald jerk thought I was stupid because I was just a kid from a hick town. Tullar was pleased with himself that he had conned a kid. My old pappy told me not to count my chickens until they were all hatched because some may be buzzards and agent Tullar was hatching buzzard eggs.

Dougie gasped. “That must be General Mac Arthur.”

“No,” I said. “That’s General Jerk. Let’s go find a spy.”

Dougie trotted after me then ran back to get his knife.



Midday sun sapped sweat and energy from us as we hurried along Clay Street. If we could find that SS Colonel before all those soldiers did, then we would show that fat general who was a dumb kid. My mind was moving faster than my feet, but it wasn't coming up with any new ideas.

"Let's go to the river," Dougie panted.

We both turned and headed the two blocks to the Guadalupe River. The gray trunks of cypress trees reared up over the lower vegetation along the river bottom. The old monsters were taller than anything except the Bluebonnet Hotel.

I slid down the trail to the river and forgot the spy. There probably wasn't a spy. The soldiers and cops were playing games because they didn't have anything better to do in Carr County.

### Chapter Three

#### A SPY IN THE BAKERY?

The cypress tree shadows were reaching out to the east as we climbed out of the river bottom. The river water had been warm, but it was better than the blast of hot air that hit us when we reached the sidewalk. The soft asphalt of Water Street warmed the calluses of my feet. I thought of walking the one block to Main Street and see what was going on, but it was nearly supertime and I had to get home.

“I bet we could find that spy,” Dougie muttered.

I fingered the card Dougie had insisted I keep and clinched my jaw. That stupid FBI agent, Sam Tullar, thought we were hicks and couldn’t read.

“Yeah?” I said, “Where would you look?” I regretted my question before I was halfway through it.

Dougie grinned. “There’s Old Man Muller.”

Mr. Muller was a German immigrant who talked with a heavy accent and owned the local bakery. “He was in the First World War,” I reminded him.

“Whose side?” Dougie barked.

“Ours.” I looked across Main Street at City Hall and remembered our last encounter with the law over spy chasing. I knew I should stay away from this caper.

Dogie whispered as if the FBI were listening. “We could go over and scout the bakery. If we could find the antenna then we could make the cops leave us alone,”

What he was saying made no sense. “I’ve known Mr. Muller all my life. He gives us day-old cookies and doughnuts.”

Dogie stopped. “They could be poisoned.” He grabbed his throat. “We’re slowly being poisoned to death.” He made gurgling sounds and staggered a couple of steps before he started sinking to the ground.

I shook my head and watched traffic whizzing past. “Get up, Dogie. We’ve been eating them for five years. If they were poisoned, even with slow poison, we’d be dead by now.”

Dogie swelled up like mad bull. I could tell logic wasn’t what he wanted. If I kept defending Mr. Muller, we were going to get in a fight. Snooping around the bakery was better than fighting Dogie and besides if Mr. Muller wasn’t the spy, he might give us some cookies.

The bakery was in a low frame building two blocks from the Mr. Pierson’s warehouse where Dougie had thought there were spies. Even though the temperature was probably 105 degrees, a cold chill ran up my back. Now my conscience was yelling for me to stay out of this spy caper. Instead, I followed Dougie along the railroad tracks to the bakery.

We walked across the crushed rock along the tracks to the back of the bakery.

When we first started going barefooted in the spring this would have killed us but this late in the summer, I couldn't feel anything.

We could hear the dough mixing machines turning and the conveyor running the loaves to the wrapper. I preferred to go in the bakery in the winter because it was hotter than the hinges of Hell in summer. I hoped Mother or my Sunday school teacher didn't find out I thought the word Hell. I was in enough trouble without adding cursing to the list.

Dougie leaned back close to me. "He's by the railroad tracks. That's a good location."

I couldn't figure out why Dougie thought it was good for a spy to be beside the tracks. There wasn't a railroad from here to Berlin.

I opened my mouth to point this out, but Mr. Muller stepped out and tossed some trash into the garbage can. He was short and bent at the waist from all the hard work he had done. I knew for a fact he gave leftover bread and stuff to poor people. How could he be a spy?

"How are you boys doing?" His accent was thick enough to cut and spread on bread.

Dougie pushed me in front and edged toward the back of the building.

"Hi, Mr. Muller. How is Albert? He still flying those P-38's?" I stammered.

For the first time since I had known Mr. Muller his smile turned into a deep, sad, frown. "My Albert was shot down over North Africa. He is wounded."

My throat closed up, forcing me to strain to breath. If I could have reached Dougie, I would have strangled him. He thought this man was a German spy when his

son had been shot down in combat.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Muller. How bad is he?” My voice quivered like the last leaf on a sycamore tree in the fall.

“He’s all right, Burr. He is in the hospital and doing well. He says they will have him flying in a month.” The frown deepened as if the old man could see the chances his son would take and feel the pain he would endure. I knew he feared for his son’s life.

“I tell you what, this Sunday Dougie and I will say a special prayer for Albert. Won’t we, Dougie?” Dougie was silent so I stomped on his foot.

“Yeah! Yeah, we will.”

The old man’s eyes misted over. “You boys come in here and get a doughnut.”

We followed him into the baking room dominated by a huge oven that reached to the ceiling. Mixing machines, tables and carts used to take dough to the pans were scattered across the floor. Mr. Schmidt was taking out loaves of fresh bread and setting them on the belt that carried them to the wrapping room.

The wonderful odor of fresh bread was laced by an even finer odor—fresh glazed doughnuts. There might be something better than fresh doughnuts, but I couldn’t think of it. As we followed Mr. Muller to the trays of doughnuts, I thought of two, fresh peach cobbler and homemade ice-cream.

Mr. Muller stopped at the table covered with the warm doughnuts. I looked around for the day-old tray we usually got to pick from.

“No, boys. Today you get fresh doughnuts.” His stomach shook like Santa Clause’s when he laughed.

We stared down at the rows of doughnuts. There were some differences, so we

had to make sure we got the best one. I reached for one then pulled back.

“Go ahead,” Mr. Muller said.

“Can we have two?” Dougie asked.

I could have killed him. We had come down here to spy on the old man and found out his son had been wounded. He had offered us each a doughnut and Dumb-as-a-doughnut-hole wanted to know if we could have two.

“Sure, take two,” Mr. Muller said. “They are fresh. Udo just cooked them.” He laughed his familiar hearty laugh, but I knew from the worry in his eyes that he wouldn’t really relax until Albert came home.

I took two of the closest ones and walked to the back door. Dougie was standing there like he was trying to figure out how he could ask for three.

“Come on, Dougie, your mama said for you to be home early.” I hoped he wouldn’t realize I’d tricked him until we got outside where I could outrun him.

He grabbed two doughnuts and ran past me like he heard his Mother calling him.

I looked back, but Mr. Muller had turned around and was packing doughnuts in a white box. Mr. Muller was a good American. That’s when I realized the Germans in Germany worried about their boys in combat, too. They cried when they got news their boys had been killed or wounded just like the families in Carrville.

## Chapter Four

### THE BOY FROM GERMANY

The dry, hot air outside felt cool after the heat inside the bakery. Dougie trotted off down the railroad track toward home. I let him go. We had gotten in enough trouble today.

Later that evening I discovered one of my theories was wrong. Not about the spy but about the courage of cats. I had rigged a parachute for one of my sister's cats, Mittens. I tried to tell Mittens he could be in the 101<sup>st</sup> Air Born, but the cat didn't want to be a Screaming Eagle. Mittens had escaped and run for the back lot to avoid being the first cat to parachute into Germany.

Dougie dropped to the dirt beside me and slung sweat all over me. "I figured out who the spy is," he said.

His statement startled me so much I forgot about paracat. "Who now? Judge Garrett or maybe Mr. Skinner, the banker." I hoped my sarcasm would cut through his thick head.

“No.” He paused, realizing I was ridiculing him. Anger struggled with his consuming idea of the day. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to beat me up or go find his spy.

Unfortunately, the spy caper won. “No, smart-aleck. It’s Mr. Schmidt.”

A vision of the little man struggling with the loaf pans in Muller’s bakery came to me. He was small and wiry and covered with black hair. He looked like a spider monkey I’d seen in the San Antonio Zoo, but not as healthy. He never saw the sun. He went to work before it came up and went home after it was down. Daddy said Mr. Muller had brought him over from Germany and worked him like a slave.

“That’s more ridiculous than saying that seal in Mr. Pierson’s warehouse was a Nazi seal, or Mr. Muller being a spy.”

I eased to the side in case he changed from spy hunter to fighter. So far, we’d gotten into a lot of trouble looking for spies but at least he hadn’t punched me, yet.

“Burr Hobbs, you don’t think any idea I have is any good.” He stood up with his fists balled.

I figured I was in for it, but I might be able to keep his brain too busy for him to concentrate on hitting me. “Why do you think Mr. Schmidt is a spy?” I asked, poking a broom straw into a doodlebug hole.

Dougie again wavered between fight and spy. Going back and forth must have given him a headache because he shouted, “Cause he’s from Germany!”

Dougie-logic was stupid, but it was consistent. “Mr. Muller’s from Germany and his son is wounded in North Africa.”

I figured this puzzle would keep Dougie busy until dark and I could go in the



house and avoid spying and fighting.

“Yeah,” Dougie said, “but Mr. Schmidt just came from Germany. He was over there when Hitler came into power,” he whispered.

Dougie might have come up with a real idea, as unlikely as that sounded. Even a blind hog will find an acorn once in a while.

I remembered a movie with a spy who had family left in Germany. He had to spy for Hitler to save them. Dougie just might have come up with the real thing. And, I would not have a problem making that FBI jerk, Sam Tullar, look bad.

“Let’s go talk to Billy and find out if he has any family still in Germany.” I started down the sidewalk, ignoring the little voice in my head that was trying to remind me that it was Dougie's idea to shave the Mayor’s cat.

Light from Mrs. Reagan’s garage pushed back the growing darkness. I could hear her banging around inside the storeroom, so I eased out of the patch of light. She was the nicest woman on the block, but I didn’t want to talk to her tonight.

Dougie was already against the Schmidt’s garage wall, peering at their back door. If they saw him, our mission would be aborted before it got started.

Mrs. Reagan spotted us. “Hello, Burr. What are you and Dougie doing?”

I had to think up a good lie, but I didn’t like to lie to her. “We’re playing Catching Spies,” I said.

The big woman laughed and wiped a trail of sweat from her cheek. “Well, I hope you catch them.”

Mr. Reagan was a surveyor and always out of town. Mrs. Reagan seemed so lonely with her boys gone off to war. I smiled at her and asked, “What’re you doing?”

She placed her hands on the small of her back and pushed as if it would relieve her pain. “My boys have some old clothes and toys that I’m giving to the Mexican Baptist preacher for the children out there.”

“Can Dougie and I help?”

“What about your spies?”

I laughed with her and answered, “There aren’t really any spies in Carrville.”

Dougie stood at the edge of the light from the garage with his fists clinched.

“Come on, Burr.”

Mrs. Reagan sat down in an old rocking chair. “Hello, Dougie. I appreciate you boys offering to help. I’m tired from working all day.”

I carried the boxes of toys she’d been packing from the back of the storeroom and stacked them at the front of the garage. “We’re glad to help, ma’am,” I said.

The box slipped as Dougie took a swipe at me with his foot. Mrs. Reagan fanned herself and wiped her damp hair from her face that looked kind of gray in the dim light. I sure hoped she didn’t croak on us, but as the evening cooled, she regained her color. Dougie and I were wet with sweat, but we finally stacked the last of the boxes where she wanted them.

Mrs. Reagan said, “I’d like to give you boys some change for helping me.” She walked to the house while we closed the garage doors.

I shoved Dougie aside before he could say anything. “No, ma’am. We were especially glad to help since it’s for the children in the barrio.”

Pain shot through my right foot as Dougie dug his big toe into my ankle. Dougie whispered, “You dunce. I need the money and besides, I don’t want to help Hector and

his thugs.”

My ankle throbbed. “Hector and his family are picking cotton and Mrs. Reagan is a nice lady. It didn’t hurt you to help her.”

“It’s almost dark. We’re going to miss Billy,” Dougie grumbled.

As we approached his house, Billy Schmidt came around the corner. Even in the twilight he could see it was Dougie and me. He turned faster than a thrown bull rider. His dog tripped him, but he regained his footing and ran toward his front door. I had forgotten we had caught him downtown last week and Dougie had jerked his pants down. They had heard him crying at the fire station two blocks away. That had seemed funny at the time, but now it was interfering with my plan.

“Hey, Billy! Wait up!” If he knew what I was thinking, he wouldn’t come out for a month.

“Yeah, Billy, wait up.” Dougie sounded like a coyote inviting a hen to tea.

I said, “We’re sorry about last week. We just want to talk to you. I’ve got an honorary FBI card.” I knew he was as dumb as Dougie and would believe that the card was the real thing.

I can see why so many sheep get eaten by coyotes. Sheep are the only animals dumber than turkeys and Billy was dumber than both. He turned and came back. If he had gobbled or bleated the picture would have been complete.

I pulled the card from my pocket and extended it to him. He stayed as far away from us as he could and still read the official looking card. All he had to see was Kelly Air Force Base. That hooked him.

He sucked in his breath. “Where did you get this?” His eyes were big as Aunt

Lucy's Christmas platter.

I nudged Dougie to slow him down. Even a sheep will run if you chase him too fast too soon. "FBI Agent Sam Tullar gave it to me. You want it?"

Billy looked over his shoulder to see if Dougie was coming up behind him. He looked at the card again and caved in. He took it and acted like he could read all the words.

"Yup, it is a real Honorary FBI card," he proclaimed. He glanced at Dougie and stepped away from him.

I smiled. "I want you to have that. We were wrong when we pulled your pants down. We apologize. Don't we, Dougie?"

Dougie flinched from the elbow I stuck in his ribs. "Yeah," he yipped. "We're sorry."

When I said I was sorry, Billy immediately became suspicious, but when Dougie said he was sorry, too, Billy knew there was something wrong. He got ready to run.

I dug in my pockets and held out two spinning tops. "Billy, here are the two tops I won from you last week. You can have them back."

Billy had cried when I won his tops, fair and square, but now he was more concerned with his hide than his tops. His Mother would whale him if she caught him betting on top fights. He reached for them but kept an eye on Dougie. He tried to pick them up with one hand but juggled and dropped them both. They bounced around his feet like yapping dogs.

I picked up the tops and handed them to him. James Cagney never had this much trouble with spies, but then he could kill the Nazis. If Billy were a real spy, I would be

tempted to kill him, but I didn't think Mother would like that.

I held the tops against Billy's stomach until he could hold them. He grasped the FBI card in one hand and the tops in his other. The whites of his eyes shone bright as our sheets when Mother left them on the line all day.

"We just wanted to talk," Dougie said softly, like a Gestapo agent to a captured member of the underground.

Now, Billy was really spooked, which is understandable. The only time we paid attention to him was when we wanted something or picked on him. Like the time we convinced him to light firecrackers under the horses in the Forth of July parade. We thought it was fun, but the cowboys and cops didn't see the humor.

I didn't blame Billy for being wary.

I said, "We've got to go. We just wanted you to know we're sorry and give your tops back." I shoved Dougie, hoping he could somehow understand what I was doing.

"What are you talking about?" Dougie blurted.

I pushed Dougie again, but his size prevented me from moving him. I had wasted two tops and this water buffalo was going to mess up my plan.

"Where you guys going?" Billy asked.

I grinned. If there was one person easier to fool than Dougie, it was Billy. "We're going to go watch the volunteer fireman practice. You want to come?"

Billy looked up the street at the truck and the men racing around like they were trying to put out the Great Chicago Fire.

"Sure. Let me put up these tops." He turned to go into his house.

I realized that if his Mother found out he was going with Dougie and me, he

wouldn't get outside for a week. "Put them on this bench," I said. "You can get them when we come back."

He shrugged and followed us to the Carrville Volunteer Fire Department practice.

Water arched from the fat hose and crashed into the street. I couldn't figure out why the city would let them waste so much water. They didn't get to most of the fires in time and they were in the way when they did get to one.

Billy sat between us engrossed in the fireman shooting water into Sydney Baker Street. I turned and casually said, "You were born in Germany, weren't you?"

The evening breeze tossed Billy's reply until I barely understood him. "Yeah," he said. "Bremen."

I glanced at Dougie who rolled his eyes and appeared to be ready to go shoot Mr. Schmidt.

"How old were you when you left?" I gestured at Dougie hoping he would stay out of the interrogation.

"Four." Billy smiled when one of the men slipped and landed in the street on his butt.

"Did you see any Nazis?"

Billy looked up and wrinkled his nose. "I don't remember any, but Papa says they were everywhere."

Dougie stood like he had all the information he needed. I shook my head, hoping to keep him from running to the police station with our newest piece of information.

I dug deeper. "You got any family still there?"

He grinned. "Yeah, my *grossmutter* and *grossvater*."

Dougie said, “Your gross what?”

“My grandmother and grandfather, Oma and Opa. They live in Heidelberg. That’s in Germany.”

When Dougie stood to run, I grabbed his ankle and tripped him. He said, “Burr Hobbs, you turn me loose.” He squeezed his words through gritted teeth.

I leaned toward him. “We need proof. We need to catch him with the radio or some evidence.”

“What radio?” Billy asked.

I felt like a chump using a friend for my own good, but it was to catch a spy. “We need to go home,” I said. “We’re going to listen to the radio.”

“My daddy has a radio. He listens to Berlin every night.” Billy gave up this important information just to spend a little more time with us.

I glanced at Dougie. “Where is it?”

Billy stood up and beamed down at us. “It’s in my parents’ bedroom. He listens every night at ten o’clock.”

How could we be so fortunate? We had been handed the spy by his own son. All we had to do was go to the cops and turn Mr. Schmidt in. Then we could thumb our noses at Agent Sam Tullar.

Dougie and I jumped up and raced across Mrs. Reagan’s front yard. I slipped through the hedge between our house and Mrs. George’s. The light was on in our kitchen, but I wasn’t hungry.

“Let’s go tell Officer Morris,” Dougie panted.

I dropped onto the rock patio behind our house. “If we go to them without the

evidence, they'll run us off. We need proof."

Dougie picked up a busted baseball bat and began killing red ants in a trail running through the dust. "What kind of proof?"

I thought back over the spy movies I had seen recently but couldn't come up with any ideas. I took a twig and dropped it on an ant. He kept trying to carry it but it was too big. Was I like the ant, trying to do something that I couldn't do? I could see Agent Tulley's grin when he bragged to officer Morris about conning us.

Dougie jumped up. "I got it!"

Dougie's ideas were never any good. If he came up with an idea, he held onto it like a bulldog. This one had better be good. "What?" I asked.

He pranced around like a Roman emperor on his birthday.  
"We spy on them."

This was better than the spy hideout at Mr. Pierson's warehouse, but not much.  
"What good will that do?"

Dougie puffed up at my questioning his idea. He was about to hit me when he squealed and ran in circles. Dougie was obviously in pain.

"What the heck's wrong with you?" I leaned back and watched him try to get his pants down. I felt like a rat enjoying Dougie's pain, but he had beat me up so many times that I thought I was due some pleasure.

He pulled his pants down and danced into a shaft of light from the kitchen window. He pulled a red ant off his groin. A red whelp was growing, sending Dougie into another squealing fit. Anytime he thought he was hurt, he wanted to go to the hospital.

"Calm down. It was just a red ant bite." I regretted saying that before the sentence



was out of my mouth.

Dougie forgot his red ant bite and swung at me. At my best I couldn't whip Dougie, but I was sitting down. He bowled me over and we rolled in the dirt like two mad dogs.

"Burr, you boys stop fighting. Get washed up, Burr, and come to supper." Mother slammed the screen door and disappeared back into the kitchen.

"I'll finish you later," Dougie promised.

Distraction, that's what I needed. "What about the spy? What about Mr. Schmidt? What about that Agent Tullar laughing at us and thinking we're too stupid to read?"

It was a long shot, but if I could rearrange Dougie's thoughts, he might forget about whipping me. I inched toward the back door in case my ruse didn't work.

Dougie looked like a cartoon character. All he needed was a light bulb over his head. "Yeah, we got to go back at ten tonight," Dougie said softly.

I turned my back like a bullfighter walking away from a tired bull. "Come by at nine forty-five and we'll sneak down there."

Dougie was still standing in he back yard when I shut the door. Two ideas in his head at the same time were confusing him again. I prayed that the last one I put in there was the one that stuck.

## Chapter Five

### WRONG ROOM DISASTER

I was still hoping Dougie had stuck with the spy idea rather than the idea of beating me up. Unfortunately, the only way for me to find out was to sneak out.

Mother forbid me to go out after nine, but she was down the hall in her bedroom. I piled my pillows under the sheet on my bed and pushed the screen out. I slid over the windowsill and dropped onto the flowerbed then eased the screen shut.

A rose bush grabbed my short pants then let go. I wished Mother would plant something other than roses under my window. Asking her to change her flowerbed sounded like a Dougie idea.

That reminded me of my current problem. The full moon made it clear as day. That made it good for us to see where we were going, but it also made it easy for those we were spying on to see us.

“Burr.” Dougie’s hoarse whisper sounded about like Officer Morris bellowing when he gets waked from a nap.

I forgot the possibility he might want to fight. “Dougie, quiet down. If we get

caught one more time, they're going to tar and feather us."

I knew Dougie would think about that. Tar and feather scared him worse than anything except the Indian Cave ghosts. We had seen a movie where they tarred and feathered two men and it had made a lasting impression on him.

"We've got to hurry. You're late," he whispered just lower than a bull at feeding time.

I started to explain to him we weren't on a critical timetable. We were going to spy on a baker who could barely speak English, not try to assassinate Hitler.

I pushed through the hedge and trotted across Mrs. George's back yard. There was no chance the old lady would catch us. She had been asleep for two hours and couldn't hear a marching band when she was awake. Mrs. Reagan was different. A shaft of light from her bedroom pierced the night, competing with the moonlight. I could see her propped up in bed, reading.

I liked Mrs. Reagan. She never yelled at us, and she gave us sugar cookies. Crossing her front yard was OK. Her back yard was off limits. She had a wire strung across part of her yard to keep people like me from cutting through. She also had tied a white rag on it so she wouldn't forget it was there. That's how we were able to dodge it. My guilt of walking where she didn't want me to was a heavy load I carried between Mrs. Reagan's house and the Schmidts'. In a mission as important as this one, it was worth the pain of guilt.

We clung to a giant live oak tree in the Schmidt's side yard and stared at the two blocks of light. One was the Schmidts' bedroom, the other was Tina, Billy's teen-age sister's room.

Dougie and I had accidentally seen her in her pajamas one night. We didn't see anything else, but I went to sleep every night praying that my Mother wouldn't find out what I had done.

"Which is old man Schmidt's room?" Dougie asked in his usual loud voice.

I said, "Why don't you send Hitler a telegram? Maybe he could tell the Schmidts there are spies outside their window." I leaned my head against the rough bark and tried to remember what Billy had said.

Dougie thought about my idea and frowned. He opened his mouth to complain when a third shaft of light shot from another window. The new light came from the front bedroom. I was sure that was where Mr. and Mrs. Schmidt slept.

I held my finger to my lips and motioned at the front window. Dougie nodded and followed me to the hedge at the side of the house.

Gravel crunched under my feet as I crossed the driveway. I didn't think James Cagney had this much trouble catching spies. It always looked so easy in a movie.

Damp leaves slapped my face and dry limbs scratched my naked chest. Music wafted through the screen window. That sounded like Tommy Dorsey not a German Oompa band.

A sick feeling knotted my stomach, and the knot grew. This entire operation was going south and my future with it. I tugged at Dougie, trying to get him to abandon the spy radio operation and retreat.

It was too late. He was across to the other side of the window and raising up on his tiptoes. What the heck, I might as well get hung for a sheep as a goat.

I looked up as Dougie eyes grew wide, then wider yet. The radio was playing

Tommy Dorsey, but that could be a code. He must have seen something important. As I rose and my eyes cleared the windowsill, I froze.

We had the wrong room.

Tina was kicking off her shoes and humming along with the music. I jerked my head sideways to signal Dougie to leave, but he had the look of a bull at the feed lot getting ready to bread a cow.

I looked back in the window. Tina had turned to take her blouse off. Dougie moaned. He didn't have a big sister like me, or he would have known it was no big deal.

He sounded like a bull in heat. He didn't know any more about girls than me and that was nothing, but he acted like he did.

Tina screamed and pulled her blouse back on. I dropped to the ground and dove through the hedge. Dougie was still clinging to the windowsill like stink on an outhouse. I couldn't leave him there.

"Dougie, come on!" My English was almost drowned out by someone screaming in German.

Mr. Schmidt was yelling at his daughter, and she was screaming back and pointing at Dougie's fat head stuck on the windowsill.

That sick place in my stomach was now a full-fledged epidemic. We were caught! The old man and the girl kept yelling. In a minute they would stop yelling and start running. Running to the telephone to call the cops.

I grabbed Dougie's short pants and jerked. "Come on!"

He moaned.

The front door banged shut, followed by a string of German curse words coming

from Mr. Schmidt. Although I couldn't speak fluent German, I had learned most of those words.

Tina ran from the room, jarring Dougie from his daze. I dragged him through the hedge and up the driveway. I could hear Mr. Schmidt cussing and his feet crunching gravel in the driveway. I had one chance.

## Chapter Six

### MOTHER DEFENDS BURR

I could see the white rag tied to the wire, shining like a beacon to a foundering seaman. My breath came in gulps and my legs were quivering. Pulling Dougie was a lot more work than I would have thought, but if I left him, he would surely lead the cops to me.

I slanted to the side of the wire and drove my legs with the last energy I had. Dougie stumbled but kept running.

Mr. Schmidt reached out for Dougie's back. His hands had just reached Dougie's back when Mrs. Reagan's wire twanged. Mr. Schmidt had hit it. I glanced over my shoulder as he somersaulted in the air. The German he spit out was not cussing and, although I couldn't understand it, it sounded like a prayer.

"Stop pulling me, Burr," Dougie yelled as he broke my hold on his shorts.

So much for secrecy. The only hope I had was that Mr. Schmidt was so occupied with his airborne problem that he couldn't make out my name or Dougie's silhouette.

I blasted through Mrs. George's cedar hedge without stopping and ran for my bedroom window. Dougie stopped and looked back at the confusion coming from the Schmidt's house. I could see the red and white emergency lights from Officer Morris's patrol car. This was going to be tight.

I grabbed Dougie. "Get out of here. Go home."

Dougie jerked his arm away. "What are they looking for?"

I stepped back from him; afraid his stupidity might be contagious. "They're looking for us, genius. We spied in Tina's window instead of Mr. Schmidt's."

Dougie's face masked over. "Yeah," he said dreamily, "now I remember."

"Do you know what your Mother will do if she finds out?" I asked.

That jarred him back to reality. "What should we do?"

I could hear voices from the other side of Mrs. George's yard. I whispered, "Sneak in the house the way you sneaked out and get back in bed. No matter what, don't tell anyone you've been out of the house tonight."

Dougie bolted up the street and disappeared down Clay Street. I trotted to my bedroom window. I had as much chance of getting out of this as the Three Stooges had of beating Superman in a foot race. As I climbed over my windowsill I wondered why I hung around with Dougie.

Down the street I saw another patrol car and the sheriff's car parked in Jefferson Street. They were treating this like I was John Dillinger and I had robbed Mr. Skinner's bank and taken all the money in town.

They even had the Texas Rangers in on it. I recognized Ranger Purvis's hat silhouetted in the moonlight. He had killed twenty-eight men. Next, they would call in



the FBI. Agent Tullar stepped beside Ranger Purvis, his pasty-white face glowing with sweat under the streetlamp.

No wonder they couldn't find the spy. All the cops in West Texas were looking for Dougie and me. I began to tremble. Maybe Mother was right, I was a bad boy. She should send me to Gatesville. I rolled over and buried my face in my pillow. Tears stung my eyes and spilled into my pillow. A knock that shook my life rattled the house. This was it. I hoped they didn't send Ranger Purvis. I didn't want to be number twenty-nine.

I heard voices from the front of the house. It sounded like Officer Morris talking to Mother. I wanted to get up and listen but the only chance I had was to be in bed, pretending to be asleep when she arrived.

Mother's footsteps tapped down the hall followed by what seemed like a bull elephant shaking the house. Officer Morris was coming after me. It was Gatesville for sure.

The door opened a crack, sending a shaft of light into the room. I prayed to God if he got me out of this, I would be a missionary and go to the Belgium Congo and convert heathens. I wouldn't steal Mrs. George's peaches ever again, and I'd be good in school and always go to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. Amen.

"See, he's asleep," Mother whispered.

Officer Morris shifted his weight, creaking the pine flooring. "There's no way for him to get out?"

I tried to breathe steady, like I would if I was asleep, but my heart was racing. I felt like Jessie James must have felt just before that coward, Mr. Howard, shot him in the

back. I fought the impulse to roll over and see what they were doing. Silently I was begging them to close the door.

Mother's voice was laced with sarcasm. "Well, yes, he could get out a hundred ways. He isn't tied in the bed."

I had a chance. Officer Morris had made her mad and she would defend me like a mother wolf.

"I just wondered if you checked on him in the last thirty minutes," Officer Morris said.

"Are you calling me a liar?" Mother's scorn could take off paint at fifty yards.

"No, ma'am, it's just that someone has been spying on the Schmidt girl, and Mr. Schmidt said he thought it was Burr and Dougie."

Rage filled Mother's voice. "You are taking the word of a German over a woman whose son was killed in the South Pacific."

Three-hundred-pound Officer Morris was backing down from my ninety-five-pound Mother. He knew when he was outweighed. I heard the floorboards creaking as he retreated down the hall.

I had never felt sorry for Officer Morris, but I did now. When Mother played her "Son Killed in the South Pacific" trump card, she could back down President Roosevelt.

I heard Officer Morris mumble, and then the front screen door slammed. I was free for now, but I knew in the morning I would be subjected to an interrogation that would pale the Spanish Inquisition.

The moon descended, leaving long shadows in the front yard. If I left now, I could make it to Jefferson Island. I could hold out for months. Then I remembered trying to

spend the night there and the mosquitoes and bugs that chewed on me. Maybe by morning she'd forget.

I remembered Tina in her room and, although we didn't see anything and I wouldn't have known if we had, I felt ashamed. It wasn't just because I knew it was wrong, but Tina was one of the big kids who was always nice to me. I really was a rat like everyone said. I stuck my head under the cover, but my problem came with me.

I must have fallen asleep because I dreamed Purvis was coming after me, swaggering along in his cowboy boots. I flipped the cover off and stared out the window at the moonlight. There was one person worse than Purvis and she was down the hall sewing. The rhythm of her treadle machine came in waves as she stitched up another dress for my sister.

I refused to shut my eyes.

In spite of my effort to keep my eyes open, I fell asleep. My dreams were fuzzy and filled with figures taunting me and telling me I was a bad boy and would pay for what I had done.

One figure draped in white drove the others away and hovered over me, like a guardian angel. Mother's face shone through the white and she stared at me over her glasses. "William," she called.

When she looked over those glasses and called me William I was in trouble. I tried to evade her but everywhere I ran she preceded me. I fell to the ground, panting.

"William?" she asked again.

I raised my head off my forearms. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Did you go out last night?" Her voice lashed at me.

If I told her I didn't and she found out, I was as good as dead. If I told her I did, I was dead. Either way it was over. I shrugged. "No, ma'am, I didn't go out."

"Are you sure?" she demanded.

What the heck, I couldn't get in more trouble. "Yes."

"Yes, you're sure or yes you went out last night?" Her voice sounded like cold steal.

I clasped my head in frustration. Lying to her was difficult enough but now she was twisting my answers.

I sprang up in my bed. Mother wasn't there. No one was there. I was losing my mind like Aunt Bertha had.

I listened but couldn't hear her treadle sewing machine. The hall clock struck three. It had all been a dream. I lay back down and smiled.

## Chapter Seven

### BLACKMAIL FOR AN ALIBI

I awoke feeling rotten. The pre-dawn had turned the world to a shadowy scene that looked like it was another planet. The trees and hedges clutched the darkness from last night, trying to hold it as long as they could, knowing they'd have to give it up.

Daddy was off on a job somewhere, leaving Mother to deal with my sister and me. Daddy always woke thirty minutes before dawn and made coffee. He said it was from his cowboy days. I had to sift the truth from the stories he told. Some of them were a little wild, but he really had been a cowboy. He claimed he didn't lie about his escapades, he just made them better tales.

Mother usually didn't get up as early as Daddy. If I got out of the house, I could avoid a big part of my grilling. I grabbed the short pants I had been wearing for three days and examined them. The right leg had a little turtle blood on it. The slur of calf manure that colored the butt came from getting thrown by Mr. Holdsworth's milk calf, jelly and a little bean juice where I'd wiped my hand smeared the left leg, and a large stain the shape of Kansas, which I couldn't identify, was on the front. I jumped into them

without underwear. They were good for one more day. Underwear was a pain. Of course, if Mother caught me without it the pain would be worse.

This morning I wasn't worried about an "only white trash don't wear underwear" lecture. In fact, I would love to have heard that lecture.

My bare feet slapped on the pine floor in the hall then padded on the carpet runner in front of the living room. I glanced into the room I was forbidden to enter. I didn't want to go in there because the furniture was uncomfortable, but I would like to have looked around once from the inside. There were pictures of dead people on the walls, looking like they each had a bad stomachache.

I slowed up in the kitchen. The fluttering curtains were the only movement in the room. I had made it up before Mother. If I hurried, I could get to Jefferson Island or up on Taylor Mountain without getting caught. If I could stay away long enough, maybe she would forget about Officer Morris looking for me.

My stomach growled to remind me it was empty. It would just have to go empty. If I could find some golf balls in the creek, I could sell them and buy some food. I hesitated.

"You're up awfully early, William," Mother said softly.

I froze. I would rather take on Officer Morris and Ranger Purvis both instead of my Mother, but I didn't have a choice.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Dougie and I are going to hunt for golf balls in the creek. We get paid for them." I prayed my effort to earn money would impress her.

She opened the door on the wood burning stove and stoked last night's coals. "Wouldn't you like some pancakes before you go."

*The condemned man ate a hearty meal.* I'd read that somewhere. If I passed on the pancakes, she would know there was something wrong. If I stayed, she would get the truth out of me. I struggled to control my voice but lost. "Sure, Mother, but it is awfully early. When I went to sleep at nine, you were still sewing."

She peered over her glasses then stirred the pancake batter she was working on. I opened my mouth to confess then shut it. I twisted in the cowhide bottom chair that had come from my grandfather's ranch house. I wished I were on his ranch or with him. He'd died before I was born.

A car backfired, scaring me worse than a pop-test in English. I settled back on the chair and tried to rebuild my image with my Mother. "Mother, is Grandpa Newton buried on his ranch in South Texas?"

Her father was her favorite subject. She almost put him above Jesus. He seemed to have all the virtues I didn't have.

"Why do you ask, William?" Her words were sweeter than the syrup she was pouring on the brown pancakes.

Why didn't she go ahead and chew me out or whip me like some Mothers did? I cut a large bite off the pancake and shoved it into my mouth. I waited for her don't-fill-your-mouth-too-full lecture, but she turned her back to me and cooked more pancakes.

If my skin could crawl it was crawling up my back and into the hair on the back of my neck. I bounced in the chair like I was riding Mr. Holdsworth's calf.

"William, are you all right?" She stacked a couple more pancakes on my plate. "Maybe you need some castor oil." Her words were soft but there was an evil glint in her eye.

This was it. I braced for the worst.

She hummed an old hymn to herself and turned to stack the clean dishes from last night into the cupboard. I had to finish the pancakes or she'd suspect the worst, but my stomach was crammed full.

Mother walked to the table and dropped another stack on my plate. There was no way I could eat all those pancakes. I felt like a pregnant cow already. If I told her she would stop making me eat pancakes.

"What's wrong, William. Are you sick?" Concrete would have melted in her mouth. She reached for another stack.

"It was me," I blurted and ran for the back door.

I leaned out over the porch and threw up those beautiful pancakes. They had tasted so good going down but something had happened to them in my stomach.

I wiped the moisture off my face and looked over my shoulder at Mother staring through the screen. If she were angry, I could have taken it, but tears glistened in her eyes. She looked sad, then shook her head and turned and walked back down the hall.

I looked down the hall toward her room praying she would come out, but she didn't.

By midday the world was hot as a loaf of Mr. Muller's bread baking. Mother had been in her room all day. I wanted to go in and let her yell at me. I wanted her to say something, but all she did was hide behind that door.

I had thrown up my breakfast and not eaten any lunch. My stomach gurgled, but I ignored it. If Officer Morris came by, I'd confess to him. I couldn't take being Enemy Number One in Carrville. I walked to Mother's door and raised my hand to knock. I



lowered it and walked away.

I gave up on Mother confronting me. There was nothing I could do about her. I had to cool off. I got to Town Lake a few minutes later, hotter than when I left the house.

The trees along the river bottom formed a tunnel like the hall in our house but it was cooler near the water. It was cooler and Mother's closed door wasn't haunting me.

I felt as if everything went wrong, even when I tried to do right. The more I thought about it, the madder I got.

I sat down on a boulder that stuck out over the water and watched an island of moss float south to the damn. Across the lake lily pads churned from the wind like my stomach felt.

Someone behind me whispered, "What're you doing here?"

I jumped up and squared off, thinking it might be Officer Morris, but it was Dougie. If it had been Officer Morris, I was going to do the best I could before he pummeled me. I lowered my hands and dropped back onto the boulder.

"I'm trying to figure a way out of all this,"

I mumbled.

Dougie sat beside me and began throwing sticks into the green water. "What's wrong this time?"

Without thinking, I confessed to Dougie. The whole town including his Mother believed we were inseparable best friends, but I knew he would turn on me. Why hadn't I kept my mouth shut? He would throw me in the river and drown me.

Of course, that would solve my problem. I wouldn't have to kill myself; Dougie would be a wanted criminal and my Mother wouldn't be ashamed of her worthless son.

“Burr, what is wrong with you?” Dougie jumped up.

I rolled away from him and stood up. If I was going to die, I wanted it to be on my feet. “I told Mother I peeked in Tina’s window.”

Dougie paled under his tan and staggered to a log half-buried in the mud. “You what?”

“I told her I did it?”

He lifted his trembling hands to his face and wiped away the sweat. “What did she do, torture you?”

I opened my mouth to tell him and realized the method she used wouldn’t sound too terrible, so I lied. “She whipped me.”

Dougie sprang like a mongoose after a cobra and jerked my shorts leg up. “She didn’t whip you. There aren’t any marks.”

It just wasn’t my day. First Mother broke down and now Dougie was grilling me. “Yes, she did.”

Dougie danced around like a rodeo clown with a hotfoot. “No, she didn’t. You chickened out and told her. I’m going to bust you one.”

I dodged Dougie’s first punch and panicked. If he knocked me in the lake I could drown. “I didn’t tell her you were in on it.”

He was so mad the muscles bunched up in cords around his neck. “If Mama finds out you were there, she won’t even ask me.” He started to tremble and added, “She will tan my hide.” then he went limp and hung his head.

I hated to do that to him, but he had been so angry he would have killed me. Now I needed to get his pea-brain off my confessing.

I ventured, "If we could establish some kind of alibi, we could convince her you weren't with me." I hoped he would buy this sham. I knew it was weak, but on such short notice it was the best I could do.

He threw his hands up in surrender and dropped back on the rock. Last summer I had convinced him to help me build a glider, then we crashed it into the Fourth of July parade. That had been bad enough, but the glider had knocked the mayor off his horse. Dougie had gotten a real spanking.

This idea was going to be harder than that and I hoped to have better results. I was going to have to come up with a super idea. His Mother wouldn't take just anyone's word. It would have to be someone one who she thought was above reproach.

I jumped up from the rock and nearly lost my balance. "I've got it!"

Dougie glared at me then held his head in his hands.

That didn't stop me. "Who does your Mother trust more than anyone in the whole world?" This really was a good idea.

Dougie looked up. "Who?"

I strutted around the huge rock like a peacock. "Jimmy Barton."

Dougie digested this. "But he's the Baptist preacher's son and he hates us. In case you've forgotten, he's the one who called the cops when we took a dip in the baptizing tub."

For the first time today, I felt like myself. "What was he doing when we took the dip?"

Dougie looked like Mrs. Sutton had asked him who was buried in Grant's tomb. Jimmy was sixteen and destined to be an ordained preacher. He preached at everyone,

and the story was his daddy paid him for converts.

I said, "The reason he caught us is because," I sailed a rock into the clear air, "he was kissing Claire Thompson behind the curtains."

The wheels in Dougie's head were grinding on the information but couldn't come up with anything. "So?"

If it weren't that I would get dragged down with him, I would let this dummy go down like the Titanic. "Oh, I don't know. Could it be that Claire is the girl all the grownups stop talking about when we come in the room?"

Dougie squinted his eyes like he did when he was shooting marbles. It didn't help him think any better than it helped him shoot marbles. "So..."

There were times when I thought Dougie was beyond help. "She is the one the big guys tease each other about." I had no idea why people talked about Claire. I liked her.

Dougie looked like someone had turned a light on. "Oh, yeah."

I knew he didn't know anything, but he wouldn't admit it. I slowly explained like I was trying to get through to a three-year-old. "We'll tell Jimmy that if he doesn't tell your mom we were at a bible study, we'll tell his dad about Claire."

Dougie didn't understand but he followed me down the street toward the Baptist church with its white spire. It was another hot day and I wished I'd taken a two-minute swim and at least started the trip cool. Since I missed out on that, I stopped and bought a Moon Pie. I gave Dougie a pinch off of it and he griped the whole way over there that it wasn't a fair pinch.

Inside the red brick church, it was quiet as a graveyard at midnight. At least as quiet as I assumed a graveyard would be at midnight. I had no intentions of finding out.

Why were churches always so quiet? If heaven was as great as the Reverend Barton claimed, why weren't all the Christians shouting about it?

Powerful fumes of sweeping compound twitched my nose. Down the hall an old typewriter clacked in an irregular beat. The only person working this time of day would be Jimmy.

I slowed at the door. The next few minutes would be critical. Dougie bumped into me, pushing me into the bright lights of the office. There was no turning back.

Jimmy Barton looked over the top of his black rimmed glasses and opened his mouth to yell at us.

"Before you yell," I said, "we're looking for Claire Thompson. Last time we saw her she was with you. She must have nearly smothered you, the way you had your face so close to hers." I got ready to run, but Dougie pushed farther into the room and blocked me.

Jimmy sputtered and stood up, knocking over a Grapette soda in the process. "Get out of here or I'll call the police!" He jerked tissues out of a Kleenex box and mopped up the soda.

His threat meant I was right. "That's okay. We'll tell your daddy you were kissing Claire when we were in the baptismal pool."

He started turning red at his throat and the color rose till his whole face looked like a bad case of sunburn. "I was trying to save her," he blurted.

I almost felt ashamed, but not quite. "I've seen a lot of people get saved but that's the first time I've seen it done like that."

Jimmy fell back into his chair and tears spilled down his cheeks. "I was trying to

convince her to give her life to the Lord. The kissing was her idea.”

Poor Jimmy was trapped just like Adam in the Garden of Eden. “Maybe we can work something out.”

He dried his tears with the last Kleenex and blew his nose. “I don’t have much money, but I can get some.”

Dougie poked his head around me. “How much?”

His life was at stake and Dougie couldn’t think of anything but money. “We don’t want money, do we, Dougie?”

“We don’t?” Dougie blurted.

There had been many times when I’d wanted to kill him, and this was one. “No. All we want is an alibi.”

The wheels began to turn in Jimmy’s head. I knew if he had any courage at all he would call our bluff. Maybe Dougie was right. And money would be easier.

Jimmy sat up straighter. “Why do you want an alibi? What have you done? You’re the two perverts that peeped in Tina’s window, aren’t you? I won’t be a party to this lie. I’m calling the cops.” He reached for the phone.

Dougie slipped behind me, leaving me in the middle of the room. “Go ahead,” I said. “We’ll be in trouble, but we’re always in trouble. You, on the other hand, will get kicked out as a future Baptist preacher. That will last for ever.”

I could feel Dougie slipping out the door. Now wasn’t the time to show the white feather.

Jimmy hesitated. I had him. He said “What do I have to do?”

I wanted to enjoy this. I paused for a beat. “Tell Dougie’s Mother we were at

Bible study last night.”

This wasn't the time to pray but I did tell God I was doing him a favor revealing this sinner.

“All right, I'll do it. Now get out of here!” he yelled.

When we left, I felt like a jerk. Jimmy was kneeling at the altar, obviously asking for forgiveness.

I crossed Sydney Baker Street and watched Dougie trudge home. Even a dope like Dougie could see that what we had done was bad. And by now Mother had probably recuperated and I was going to get what I deserved.

## Chapter Eight

### THE HIDING PLACE

I slammed the front screen door behind me. I had no hope that Mother had forgotten. It was late enough she should be in the kitchen cooking. The grandfather clock in the hall ticked. The house felt spooky.

I tiptoed up the hallway, although if I had walked normally my bare feet wouldn't have made any noise. Mother's door was shut. I stopped and listened. There was no sound.

This really was strange. There was no one in the kitchen but a blue-bottle fly buzzing around, looking for food. I joined him and was shocked to find there was no food on the table or in the refrigerator. I checked the cookie jar and found only dust and crumbs. The fly gave up and flew out to the back screen porch.

I couldn't remember my Mother not cooking supper, except for the time my big brother went to jail for fighting and when he got killed in the South Pacific. Now he was dead and most of the time she cooked too much. I walked to the back door and dropped



onto the stool beside the screen door.

I was still sitting there when Carrville turned dark. Now I was really worried. Maybe Mother was in the hospital. Who should I call? I could call the cops, but I was even more unpopular with right now than usual.

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten anything except a Moon Pie since breakfast. I had spent my last nickel on that Moon Pie and there was no prospect of any more money coming in any time soon.

The corner streetlight cast shadows across the kitchen and made it feel more deserted. I turned on the radio just for the noise. Bob Hope was telling his jokes with all his buddies, but I didn't think they were funny. At least not tonight.

In the cupboard I found an almost empty jar of peanut butter. There wasn't enough left to cover a cracker much less a biscuit. I scraped the sides of the jar and under the rim and ate it off my finger. Last night Mother had fixed fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, biscuits and apple pie.

I threw the jar away and checked the refrigerator again. With only mother and me here there should have been lots of food left over. What had happened to the leftovers? There was something fishy going on.

I found a jar of spiced peaches from last year's canning in the back of the cupboard. I didn't like spiced peaches, but they were the best meal I had ever eaten.

Red Skelton was one of my favorite programs, but when it came on it was more like noise tonight. I wanted my mother. I was hungry, but more than that, I wanted my mother. When Red Skelton was over, I went to bed.

The next morning, I got up when the town roosters started crowing. I tiptoed to

Mother's bedroom door and listened. I couldn't hear anything, but she didn't snore like Daddy did. There was no way I could tell if she was home.

I knew I was a really bad boy. Most of the time I didn't think I was, but if I was so bad my own Mother left me, then I must be terrible.

I searched the kitchen again, but food hadn't mysteriously appeared. My stomach was really growling now. This was getting to be an emergency. I trotted out the back door and down Clay Street to the Red and White store.

"Hi, Mrs. Ross," I greeted the sour-looking storeowner. "Mother has gone to see her sister in Hondo and she told me to put any groceries I needed on the tab." I held my breath, fearing our credit had been cut off.

She looked through her tinted glasses and snarled, "All right."

I nodded and scurried away from her and trotted to the bread rack. I wasn't interested in bread, but I found packages of cinnamon rolls on the same shelf. The odor that seeped through the paper made my mouth water and my stomach demand attention. I stopped at the milk cooler and grabbed a bottle of chocolate milk. The two items cost enough to feed our whole family for two days, but I didn't care. I had to have some food, fast.

I dropped the empty cinnamon roll package and drained the milk. I left the empty milk bottle behind the building. I could get two cents for the bottle at Carson's Store but that wouldn't feed me. I needed some money. I pushed aside the dusty hedge between my house and the King's. Crystal sunlight sparkled off the dew clinging to the Bermuda grass in Mr. King's front yard. That dew was going to last about as long as the chocolate milk and cinnamon rolls in my stomach.

Later that morning sunrays shot over the tops of huge thunderheads to the east. Dougie was stumbling behind me, grumbling about getting up so early. I had explained to him we had to get to the golf course before Mr. Mitchell, the course manager. If we didn't, we couldn't dive for golf balls in the pond on the third fairway.

I needed money. Mother had disappeared. Mack wasn't buying scrap metal and the town people knew the peaches we had sold door to door last week had come from Mrs. George's tree. I got spanked and worse, I got the stealing lecture.

That left golf balls from Bolyn Creek as a source of money. If we could beat Mr. Mitchell to the creek and find some golf balls, I'd be back to eating. At a nickel a piece it didn't take many balls to pay for a movie when the movie cost nine cents. A hamburger, fries and a shake were a quarter.

I crouched at the edge of the low water bridge crossing the creek below the golf course. Dried mud caked the bridge from spring floods. Now the sun had turned the dirt into powder. Across the road ragweed was white with dust, making it look like it had snowed. Although it was six thirty, sweat dripped from my head onto my bare skin. Snow. That was a laugh.

Dougie caught up with me. "Slow down, Burr. We ain't running a race."

Without looking back, I grunted. "Yes, we are. If Mr. Mitchell catches us, he'll take our balls away from us and sell them himself."

I stepped onto the bridge and stopped. The concrete shook and sounded like a convoy had rolled across it, sending me back into Dougie. We sprawled in a patch of ragweed and looked up, searching for the source of the noise.

The rumbling came from three huge army trucks covered with green canvass. But

first an olive-drab army Jeep with three soldiers slouched in the seats rolled over the bridge. A van with its antenna sticking up like a Buck Rodgers science fiction Saturday movie followed the Jeep. Soldiers stared out the back of the trucks, looking bored enough to make combat look good. The antenna on the back of the van turned back and forth as the caravan rumbled up the caliche road.

Dougie shoved me. “Get off me, Burr, or I’m going to punch you silly.”

I rolled over in the weeds and watched the line of trucks stop. The soldiers jumped from the trucks and trotted up the road. One of the men from the Jeep yelled at them and then followed them.

I slipped down into creek and motioned for Dougie to follow. He glared at me and shook his head. When Dougie couldn’t figure out what was going on, he balked. Cold creek water lapped around my knees sending goose bumps where sweat had rolled minutes before. Mud squished between my toes like chicken droppings. I wanted to get out of the mud, but the creek bottom was covered with the slime. I shuddered at the water spiders squiggling over the surface. I knew they couldn’t bite, but I hated spiders.

“What are those soldiers doing out here?” Dougie asked.

“Looking for the spy radio,” I whispered.

Dougie stood up and looked like a suicidal turkey at a turkey shoot. One of the soldiers yelled and two men from the Jeep looked back at us. One of them called to his officer.

The officer yelled back, and the two men trotted toward us. Even Dougie knew it was time to withdraw. We crashed through the creek bottom and headed for the big hole of water behind Jimmy Galloway’s house.

Behind us, soldiers yelled and struggled through the matted honeysuckle and bugler vines. We hit the clear trail and ran as fast as we could along the smooth packed dirt. At the big hole of water, we shinnied up the trunk of a live oak tree and then out across a limb over the water. The two soldiers broke free of the vines and raced down the creek. They reached the base of the tree just as we crossed over to the other side. I didn't slow down as I shinnied down a pecan tree and into the brush at the base of the cliff. They yelled at us, but we were climbing up the cliff and into Brown's back pasture.

We trotted away from his randy old bull and headed for the road that led us back into town. I knew Dougie's silence was a bad sign, but I didn't stir him up. I wanted the idea I was sure he was chewing on to stay in his head.

At Holdsworth's Mobile station I ran cold water over my already sweat soaked head and then drank from the gushing hose. The rubber-tasting water was the best drink I'd had in my entire life.

We had spent the last thirty minutes dodging from house to house to avoid the soldiers in the Jeep who were looking for us. We had seen them four times but managed to evade them. Now I was more frightened of them than the idea Dougie was chewing on: whether or not to beat me up. If they chased the German colonel as hard as they were chasing us, they would have caught him by now.

Dougie grabbed the hose and ran it over his head. I watched for Mr. Holdsworth. If he caught us using his hose, he'd yell at us and we already had all the trouble we needed.

"Let's go to Bode's hay barn." I trotted past Dougie and across the street.

Dougie dropped the hose. I ran back and turned the water off. If we thought those

soldiers were bad, Mr. Holdsworth would skin us if we left his water running.

“Do you think we need to go to the barn?” Dougie ran after me. The hay barn was our ultimate retreat. We saved it for times when we needed to be hidden from everyone but God, and I wasn’t sure that even He could find us there.

We cut behind the hospital and into Mrs. George’s yard. Officer Morris was talking to Mother, and it didn’t look like he had come to give me the Good Citizenship Award.

“What do you think?” I said over my shoulder.

Dogie leaned into me “I’m glad they aren’t after me.”

I stood and walked through Mrs. George’s back yard. “Where do you think Chief Eckstein is?”

Dogie opened his mouth then ran past me for Bode’s hay barn. He beat me there by half a block. The roof extended out, protecting the hay from rain but there were no walls, just stacks of hay. We had discovered the area on top of the bales and under the roof by accident. Hector Rodriguez was chasing us and it was the only place to hide that we could find. We figured if Hector couldn’t find us then it must be the best hiding place in the whole world.

We approached from the lea side, away from Mr. Bode’s office and pulled a bale away at the hay-wall base. We had built a tunnel up through the hay to the top layer of hay. I ignored the Johnson grass hay poking me and breathed in the odor that smelled good enough to eat. I reached the top and plopped down. Up here under the tin roof, shaded by the limbs from a huge pecan tree, the breeze was cool. I lay back on the hay and remembered Max saying I was a trouble magnet. I thought I was a Dougie Masterson

magnet.

Dougie sprawled beside me, chewing on a hay sprig. “Why are they after us?”

I rolled over on my stomach and glared at him. Sometimes he was so dense I wondered if it was an act. “Because we’re the only people in Carrville who know they’re really looking for a spy.”

A blue, flat-bed truck drove by on the caliche road, sending a cloud of white dust spiraling into the air. It drifted to the unpainted, dust-covered warehouse across the street and added another coat. The truck pulled under the shed and stopped. We heard Mr. Bode grunt as he struggled with the hay, then leave. He came for hay twice while we hid on top of his hay bales. He wasn’t looking for boys and we kept quiet.

The third time I listened but couldn’t hear him loading hay. I thought I heard another intruder. I crawled on my belly to the edge of the bales and looked over. Somebody was climbing up from below. I threw myself back and yelled. Dougie rolled to the far edge of the hay and looked down thirty feet to the ground. He looked back to me as if trying to figure out if the drop was worth avoiding whoever was coming up the hay.

Demmie poked his full-grown head over the edge and grinned. “Boy, are you guys in trouble.”

I dropped back onto the hay and lay on my back. That was like telling Major Deveroux, the commander of the U.S. Marines on Wake Island, that he had trouble just before the Japs overran them.

“Why are we in trouble?” Dougie asked.

Demmie grinned, splitting his pumpkin-sized head like the grin on a Jack-o-lantern. In the half-light Demmie kind of looked like a Jack-o-lantern.

The pumpkin spoke. “The army and the cops are both looking for you. Last I heard, Ranger Purvis had come into town and he’s looking for you, too.”



## Chapter Nine

### THE HANGING JUDGE

Cops? Army? Looking for us? My throat constricted like the time I had the croup and couldn't breathe, only this time whisky and rock candy weren't going to solve my problem. I wondered what direction Mexico was and realized I couldn't beat Ranger Purvis. Purvis was a real honest-to-goodness Texas Ranger who had killed twenty-eight men in the line of duty. There were rumors he had killed more but only claimed twenty-eight. I wondered how many bad boys he had killed.

Dougie began to blubber. I wanted to cry, too, but one of us had to stay calm or we'd be in a lot worse trouble.

"Calm down," I said. "The army, the cops and Purvis have better things to do than chase us." I hoped my voice sounded more positive to them than it did to me.

Demmie said, "I seen them guys wearing ties and driving new cars at the police station with the cops. Before they ran me off, I heard them talking about you two. My mama said if I spoke to you two again, I would be eating what supper I got standing up." He slobbered as he spoke, not because of the seriousness of the situation but because he'd mentioned food.

Dougie tried to talk but all he could do was blubber.

“Stop it, Dougie. How can you believe Demmie? He is the dummy who told us that old man Schmidt’s cow had a two headed calf.” I knew this was a sensitive subject with Demmie, but I had to do something to shake Dougie up.

Demmie lunged across the hay at me. The only thing that saved me was the bales gave way under him and he tumbled down our tunnel.

We could hear muffled cries from Sweetpea Rawlins in the collapsing tunnel. Demmie was yelling for us to help him out. “Leave him down there for a while. It’ll calm him down,” I hollered.

Dougie cocked his head as if trying to remember what it was he was worried about before Demmie joined the submarine corps.

“He might suffocate,” Dougie pulled a bale aside.

Demmie poked his head above the bales and glared at me. There was a possibility I had gone too far but then how much more trouble could I be in.

Demmie’s face was red as Mr. King’s prize tomatoes, his eyes squinted up with rage. “You little squirt, I’m going to pound you,” he squawked like a goose being pulled through a knothole backward.

I scuttled away from the big moose and tried to figure a way out of this mess. I’d accept help from anyone.

Ranger Purvis stuck his head above the hay bales and grinned. “You boys, come on down. Some people want to talk with you.”

I wished Dougie had killed me. Purvis might make me number twenty-nine on his list of those killed in the line of duty.

I couldn't tell if Dougie was blubbing or not. I was crying too loud myself. Demmie swallowed his anger and, like Dougie, looked over the edge of the hay to the ground below. I already knew it was too far.

Hay stuck to me as I followed Purvis down the tunnel and out onto the ground. He turned his back on us and walked to his car. Someone else might have thought about escape but I had seen him shoot a man at the Rainbow Tourist Courts. He told the man to come on to the car with him and the man pulled a gun. He shot at Purvis. I will never forget Purvis's face as he slowly turned around and shot the man between his eyes.

I followed Ranger Purvis to his car and got in the back seat. My mama raised lots of ugly kids, but she didn't raise any dumb ones.

Purvis watched the other two climb into the car. As he drove down the street he smiled. "When I was your age, I was using Mr. Bode's hay barn for a hideout. I promise I won't tell anyone about it."

I had never thought of Purvis as a boy.

When we reached the police station it all came back to me. Purvis said, "Boys, I believe you know everyone, unless you haven't met Lieutenant J. Simmons."

We nodded our acknowledgements from a distance. Chief Eckstein, Officer Morris, Agent Tullar and the lieutenant were standing under the pecan tree talking. If the U.S. Army could afford to send all those soldiers to Carrville to find two boys, they must not have much to do.

After talking to Agent Tullar I could see why they had sent him. They wanted him to get out of the way so they could get on with the war. The soldier looked like he might be able to pour water out of a boot with directions on the heel, with help.

Officer Morris and Chief Eckstein glared at us as if it were our fault they had been waked from their afternoon naps. I might survive the FBI and the army, but those two cops were going to get me sooner or later.

Then there was Mother. Sooner or later, I had to face her.

Purvis pushed Demmie aside because he wasn't involved in our little caper. I had never envied Demmie before but now I would have swapped places with him belly, pumpkin head and room tempter IQ.

Purvis led us to the circle of men and stood to the side smiling. I couldn't see anything funny about any of this.

I looked at the big lieutenant's belt buckle and then at the FBI man's sweat-soaked white shirt. Only a Yankee would wear a coat and tie in August in Texas, shoulder holster or not.

My knees shook and my hands trembled. Tears filled my eyes. All my reasons for looking for the spy were suddenly blotted out. If I ever got out of this, I would never get in trouble again. Scout's honor.

Agent Tullar said, "We told you boys to stay away from the golf course area."

The rest of his words were blocked out by the lie he'd told. We weren't looking for the spy at the golf course. We were looking for golf balls. That rat was covering his own mistake by saying we'd disobeyed a direct order.

Lieutenant Simmons glared at the FBI agent and cut in "Why were you boys out on golf course road so early this morning?"

Dougie tried to talk but all he could do was blubber. I pushed past him and said, "We were going to look for golf balls in the creek. We sell them for a nickel a piece."

Lieutenant Simmons glared at Agent Tullar.

Agent Tullar shoved past the soldier; his head stuck out like a mad snapping turtle's, "You disobeyed an order and now you're lying."

Ranger Purvis laughed and walked between us and the two men. "You can't give an order to a little boy. And how do you know he's lying? I used to dive for golf balls on the third fairway myself, but I didn't get a nickel. We only got two cents."

Lieutenant Simmons grinned and turned away.

Agent Tullar glared up at Purvis, but he had heard the stories about the ranger, and he wasn't interested in finding out if they were true. "Those boys said they wouldn't tell anyone about the maneuvers."

Ranger Purvis laughed. "They didn't. You did. You not only told about the maneuvers, but you told everyone in town there's a spy in the area."

The FBI Yankee looked like he felt the dirt slipping from beneath him. He stepped back and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

Chief Eckstein said, "Purvis is right. If you hadn't gone around town blaming the boys no one would have known anything."

I didn't think I would ever want to kiss a cop, but I did now. The entire meeting was falling apart. If I could keep Dougie from running, we could get off with only a reprimand.

Lieutenant Simmons snorted. "What are we going to do, let them off scot-free after they fouled up a secret operation?"

The grin on Purvis's face should have told me I was not getting off as light as I had hoped. I suspected that I wasn't going to get off at all.

Purvis pushed his hat back until I could see the pale strip of forehead above his tan line. "You know that outdoor privy at the City Park?"

Now I was considering running except that my escape route was blocked by two huge cops.

Eckstein's sudden laugh sounded evil. That was a bad sign. If he thought whatever Purvis was talking about was horrible, I was too young to hear about it.

Officer Morris grinned. "Yeah, the mayor's been raising cane for us to take some prisoners over there and clean out the pit."

Lieutenant Simmons grinned. Agent Tullar wiped his forehead and glared at everyone. He looked like he was one of two who didn't know what was happening. Dougie was the other. He was laughing and talking with Demmie. He was as carefree as the man on a horse about to be hanged who thought the rope around his neck was to keep him from falling off the horse.

My knees buckled. Tears rolled down my cheek. If there ever was unjust punishment this was it.

"What do you think?" Purvis asked the soldier.

Lieutenant Simmons grinned. "I think this will keep the little devils busy for a while."

Chief Eckstein stepped in front of us. "Come on in and see Judge Garrett."

My stomach fell to my knees. He was known as the hanging judge. I would have taken Devil's Island rather than the hanging judge.

Dougie resisted Officer Morris's hand on his shoulder but had as much chance as an ant would against a bull elephant.

The entire group clomped down the hall to the judge's courtroom. The old man was bent over his bench, writing. "What brings you boys here?" he asked.

The judge had massively thick eyebrows running across his forehead. There was no break in them, and they stood out like a wicked caterpillar. We kids called him caterpillar head. I prayed as hard as I could, not for mercy, but that the judge didn't know I was one of the boys who had painted "caterpillar head" on the fence beside his house. It had been Dougie's idea and I would have stayed out of it, but he couldn't spell caterpillar.

Purvis stood before the bar like a lawyer. "These boys interfered with an official government search. Their conduct has caused the operation to be exposed, and..."

The Judge Garrett waved an arm to stop the ranger. He was the only man in Texas who wasn't afraid of Ranger Purvis. "They didn't compromise the search, incompetent adults did." His bushy gaze swept the adults in the room like a warden spotting prisoners escaping.

Everyone except Purvis looked at their feet and shuffled nervously. Purvis said, "I know that sir, but in order for some men to save face and to keep these two out of the army's way, we request that you sentence them to hard labor."

The judge looked into my eyes, and I was sure he could see the white paint we had used on his fence. "What did you have in mind?"

Ranger Purvis chuckled. "The outhouse at the City Park is overflowing and there aren't any prisoners in jail available to dip it out. We would like for you to sentence these boys to clean it out."

Laughter bounced around the courtroom but died as quickly as it had started when

Judge Garrett glared at them. He arched his eyebrows at the men, then glared at me.

“What does his mother think about that?” the judge asked.

Purvis grinned. “She said any way we could keep Burr out of trouble was a good idea, including sending him to the state home for delinquent boys in Gatesville.”

My stomach was already to my knees, but it was headed for the floor.

Judge Garrett wiggled his eyebrow while he considered our fate. I prayed Dougie didn’t stare at it. I glanced at him, and he was staring at it like he’d never seen it before.

Why did I keep hoping Dougie would change?

Judge Garrett sucked on his teeth. “That’s humiliating and could be dangerous to their health.”

Purvis leaned across the bench and announced, “I understand they’re pretty good painters.”

Judge Garrett’s face turned purple. I wasn’t afraid of dipping out an outhouse any longer. I wasn’t even afraid of death. The judge looked like he was about to explode.

He rapped his gavel on the bench and yelled, “You boys are hereby sentenced to clean the outhouse in the City Park.”



## Chapter Ten

### THE RIGHT DIPPER

My lip quivered as I fought to keep from crying while we walked from the courtroom surrounded by big men. No wonder a spy could operate in Carr County. All the lawmen were busy arresting and punishing a couple of boys.

I considered pointing this out to them but decided it wouldn't be a good idea with my current record. Brilliant sunlight blinded me when we reached the courthouse steps. I raised my forearm over my eyes and squinted up at the law west of San Antonio: Ranger Purvis.

Chief Eckstein asked, "You want us to take them out there?"

Purvis smiled. "No, I'll take care of the little criminals. One of you will have to keep an eye on them from time to time. Don't want them to loaf on the job."

Lieutenant Simmons spoke up "or get involved in this operation."

We followed Purvis to his Pontiac sedan and climbed into the back seat. It was little consolation that I was following in the path of some of Texas' worst criminals. I'd

rather go to the Belgium Congo and be a missionary. Then I remembered feeling the same way when we got caught spying in Schmidt's window.

Purvis climbed in the front seat. "We're going to need some buckets. We don't want them too big or too small. If they're too big you can't pull them out with the sewage and you'll fall in." He choked back a laugh, but I couldn't see anything funny.

Dougie blubbered and stared at his hands in his lap. I had cried myself out and was resigned to becoming the laughingstock of the town. It was bad enough to have to dip out sewage but to do it in front the entire town was too much. If I thought I could get away without being killed I would have jumped from the car. With my luck I would get my back broken and Ranger Purvis would still make me clean out the pit under the outhouse.

When Purvis finished whistling the notes from a song I didn't recognize he said, "Then on the other hand, we don't want to get a bucket that's too small. That could take you a couple of weeks to carry out your sentence."

The thought of dipping raw sewage for two or three weeks broke my composure. I began to sob with Dougie. I was past humiliation.

Purvis pulled into Sanger's Lumber Company and stopped. The wind blew a dust devil up the sun-baked runway then tore itself to shreds on the back fence.

Mr. Sanger came out of his office and asked, "What can we do for you, Purvis?"

Purvis stepped from the car and adjusted his hat. "These boy's been sentenced to dip out the outhouse pit at the City Park and we need some buckets."

Mr. Sanger's laughter echoed down the runway. "What in the world did they do?"

Purvis grinned. "It's a military secret."

“They made that FBI man look like a fool, didn’t they?” Mr. Sanger said.

Purvis said, “something like that.”

Mr. Sanger spit in the dust, “he was a fool a long time before those boys got hold of him.”

Purvis grunted like he agreed but didn’t want to comment. “We need some buckets, Andy. You got any.”

Mr. Sanger waved toward the trash pile at the back of the lumberyard. “Sure, help yourself.”

Any other time we would have been excited about going through Mr. Sanger’s trash. There were shingles, strips of molding, paint cans and all kinds of good boards.

Purvis led us back there and squatted in the shade. “Now you boys find me the right size bucket. I don’t want to mess with this because I’ve got some important work to do.”

Dougie and I sauntered toward the trash.

Purvis jumped up and stomped toward us. I remembered the story of the bank robber who found out Purvis was after him and he came in and surrendered. I understood why. I thought I had seen rage before but the only human who could get as angry as Purvis looked was my father. I jumped in with both feet and slung garbage aside looking for a bucket. Purvis tapped Dougie on the shoulder. “I’m not joshin’ with you boys. You’ve been bulling this town around for years. Now I’m putting you on notice that those days are over. From now on you will do exactly as your parents and the other adults in this town tell you.”

I wanted to look around to see his eyes, but I was too busy throwing trash. I found

a gallon paint can and ran to him. “Is this big enough?”

Purvis threw the can aside. “No. It has to be bigger.”

Dougie found a tiny enamel can and turned to take it to Purvis but wheeled back and dove into the trash when he saw Purvis’s eyes.

Stippling mud clung to the bottom of the five-gallon bucket I spotted. I didn’t think he meant one that big, but I ran to him, lugging it along.

He threw it aside. “No, that isn’t big enough.”

I could see me trying to pull a five-gallon bucket of sewage out of that pit. My arms quivered and I saw dots in front of my eyes. If I tried to pull that out of the pit I would die.

Dougie stopped and stood in the sun crying. He was doing as much good as I was. I stopped to join him then caught a glimpse of Purvis’s eyes looking from under his hat. I ran around the pile of trash jerking and throwing trash.

I yelled, “Dougie, if you don’t get to looking, you’re going to be bailing out that pit with your bare hands.”

Dougie ran over me to get to the garbage.

Purvis said, “Come on, you boys, there isn’t a can big enough here.”

We trotted behind him like two whipped dogs. Mr. Sanger laughed as we crawled into the back of Purvis’s car. Dust billowed up a white cloud behind us. I wanted to get in that cloud and float away.

I clamped my hands over my mouth in case he could read my mind. Tears rolled past my hands and puddled in the grime that had accumulated on my stomach. I couldn’t figure out why we were in so much trouble. All we had done was try to find some golf

balls so we could go to the movie. The U. S. Army and Texas Rangers had captured us. I wanted to tell Purvis that if he left little boys alone he'd have time to catch the spy, but I wasn't stupid.

We stopped in front of the Conoco distributor's warehouse. Silver tanks blocked the blue sky behind the weathered building. I stopped crying and wondered why we were stopping here.

"Get out, you boys. We've got to find a bucket for you to bail out that pit." He walked ahead of us into the building.

From the back of the dimly lit room Red Bullard yelled, "Purvis, what brings you down here? And why you got them boys? They must be awful bad."

Purvis turned and smiled at us. "No, they've volunteered to bail out that overflowing sewage pit out at the City Park."

Red squinted at us like he thought we were crazy, then he boomed a laugh that shook the building. "How can I help? I hear the mayor has been bustin' a gut over that."

"They need a bucket. You got any buckets?" Purvis asked.

Red walked through the back door and pointed at a pile of garbage. "There's all kinds of buckets in there. You're welcome to any of them."

Dougie and I held back. The mess was covered with grease and oil and plaster from a gas station Red had remodeled. I never objected to a little dirt, but I didn't want to get into that.

"Get after it, boys," Purvis growled.

The pile of garbage didn't look too bad. I sprinted to it and began throwing trash aside, searching for a bucket. Red and Purvis doubled over laughing and pointed at us. I

didn't care. I wanted to get a bucket and get that stuff bailed out.

A ten-gallon transmission fluid can rolled out of the trash pile. Dougie dove for it but I grabbed it first. With my hands trembling and tears running down my face, I ran to Purvis and held it up. I didn't care who saw me. I wanted out of this mess.

Purvis inspected the bucket like a matron at a tea party. He turned his nose up. "No, too small."

Dougie grabbed a twenty-gallon barrel that had contained brake fluid. He struggled to get it to Purvis. I stood beside him knowing I couldn't pull that barrel full of sewage out of that pit.

"No, I guess we will have to look somewhere else." Purvis led us back through the warehouse and to the car. Behind us I could hear Red laughing. I had never been so humiliated, but I didn't care. If he was going to shoot us, I didn't care, I just wanted it over with.

I could see the water tower that stood over the City Park. He was going to make us bail it out by hand. We were only two blocks away and the only thing between us and the park was Mr. Powell's welding shop.

Whenever we tried to watch Mr. Powell weld or cut metal, he would run us off. He was the biggest grouch in Carrville. Mrs. George was grouchier, but she was a woman.

Purvis stopped in front of Mr. Powell's. He got out and walked to the open front door. I looked at Dougie and we both turned to the door leading to freedom. I thought about running but remembered the twenty-eight men Purvis had killed. I lunged out the door and I trotted after him, my body shaking with fatigue. If I ever got out of this, I

would never do anything bad again. I would go to church and give ten percent for the starving children in China.

“Able, you got any buckets you can spare?” Purvis asked.

Mr. Powell turned off an acetylene cutting torch. “Buckets? Why you want a bucket and why you got them two boys with you? They’re the two worst trouble-makers in Carrville.”

I opened my mouth to object but didn’t think Mr. Powell or Ranger Purvis were interested in my opinion of the other boys in town.

“They’re going to bail out the sewage in the pit of the outdoor privy at the City Park and they need a bucket.” Purvis grinned.

I had known Mr. Powell all my life and had never seen him smile. He grinned at Dougie and me like a coyote looking at an open hen house door. “No,” he said, “all I got is that fifty-five-gallon barrel over there.”

He pointed with the cutting torch at a rusty barrel propped against the shed wall. Sun shown through a hole in the side big enough to throw a full-grown armadillo through. If we tried to bail the park privy out with that we would get a double hernia.

Purvis said, “Able, I think that’s about right. You mind if these boys borrow it.”

Mr. Powell chuckled. “No, it would be worth losing the barrel to see those little scamps doing honest work. Take it.”

Purvis signaled us over to the barrel. “We can’t get it in my car, so you have to carry it to the park.”

I looked at the barrel and then up the dusty street to the park. It was only a block, but it looked like a hundred miles. I looked back at the barrel and decided not to do what

Purvis said. I turned back to tell him what he could do with his barrel and stopped. His smile was gone, and his eyes were slate gray. I knew how those twenty-eight men had felt just before he had killed them.

I rolled the barrel over and squatted. "Grab the other end, Dougie."

Dougie started to cry. "I can't."

Purvis stood over him. "Pick up that barrel."

It wasn't the words but how he said. Dougie was the laziest person on the earth, but he squatted and grabbed the barrel. We lifted and staggered up the road. The sun pounded on my head and sweat flowed down my face. My eyes burned from the salt in the sweat and the sunlight, but I didn't stop. My hands cramped and my legs felt like they were going to crater but I could hear Purvis car purring behind us.

"I can't go any further," Dougie gasped.

My words felt like they had tooth prints on them from squeezing between my teeth. "Tell Purvis that."

Dougie staggered, but he kept carrying. I'd read how bad the Batan Death March had been, but there was no way those Japs could have been any crueller than Purvis. Black dots were blurring my vision and my head pounded like it had a jackhammer in it. I wobbled and lunged. The barrel rolled away from us and came to rest against the privy. I hadn't even known we were in the park.

I rested on my hands and knees. I gasped at blast-furnace-hot air and was glad to get it. Dougie was laying on his back whimpering. The foul smell of the sewage in the pit reached my senses. To hell with it. I wasn't going to bail out that pit.

"Get up," Purvis said softly.



The strong rebellion I had felt went south. I wobbled up and leaned against a chinaberry tree. The shade was cool, but it had been so long since I had been in the shade, I felt a chill in the hundred-degree heat.

Dougie lay on the ground crying. "I can't get up."

Purvis cocked his forty-five automatic in its holster. The sound shattered the quiet park. Dougie who only a few seconds before couldn't get up sprang to his feet like a gazelle. He rolled the barrel to the pit and stood there crying. I didn't think Purvis would shoot us if for no other reason than that he didn't want to face my mother.

Purvis said, "Here's a rope. Tie it to the barrel."

I didn't know a voice that was almost a whisper could be so frightening.

We struggled to get the rope around the barrel and fought over the knot. I stood beside the barrel and looked at the sewage baking in the afternoon sun.

Purvis leaned over between us. "Are you boys ready to empty out that pit?"

The burst of energy I got from Purvis cocking his pistol had been used up. I considered fainting but was afraid I'd roll into the pit and drown.

"Yes, sir," we croaked.

Purvis stood up. "I'm going to leave this barrel with the rope tied to it. This time you don't have to empty the pit. But, if I hear of the two of you getting into trouble again, I'm bringing you back out here and make you bail out all that sewage." Purvis turned and walked to his car.

I began to sob from relief and fatigue. I was so exhausted I could only whimper and so dry I had no tears.

I looked at the barrel and then at Dougie and fell to the ground.

## Chapter Eleven

### BURR'S TEMPTATION

Brassy sunlight covered the Hill County in its metallic glaze like the crust on a loaf of Mr. Muller's bread. I squinted at the cypress trees half a mile away along the river. The water would be lukewarm but cooler than the breeze blowing across my tree house. I had been confined to our yard because of my antics for the rest of my life plus two years. At least until school started.

It had been three days since Dougie and I carried the barrel to the park to dip out the sewage. We were the only humor in drought-stricken Carr County. It wasn't too bad that Mother had confined me to our yard and to never play with Dougie. I was lucky. No one could ridicule me while I was at home, and I hadn't talked to Dougie since the park privy escapade.

I had seen him at a distance, but we didn't wave. It was like we were ashamed of our crime and seeing each other reminded us of the humiliation of our punishment. We shouldn't have been ashamed, though. Grown men would have done the same if Purvis

had threatened them.

I heard a loudmouth at the Smokehouse was ridiculing us until Purvis offered to take him to the outhouse. As far as I know, no one mentioned it again.

I heard from Mother's end of telephone conversations that the army was still looking for the spy. I didn't care if he was going to assassinate President Roosevelt I wasn't interested.

I felt bad about not caring if they assassinated the President, so I left my tree house and crossed the street to Mrs. Sublit's. I took a chance on not telling Mother I was leaving the yard, but she was at a circle. Daddy said a circle was where the Methodist women talked about the women that weren't there and the Baptists. Mother said Daddy didn't know what he was talking about.

Mrs. Sublit was a widow woman who lived with her 4f son who was the disgrace of the town. It didn't matter that he had heart trouble, anyone who couldn't serve their country in 1943 was a disgrace. Sometimes I worried I would be 4f when they drafted me.

Mrs. Sublit shaded her eyes from the glare of the sun when she answered the door and said, "Hello burr, I thought you weren't supposed to leave your yard."

Everyone knew about Purvis and dipping out the pit at the park. "Yes mam, but Mother said it would be alright to mow your lawn."

It was a small lie and with my current reputation I didn't see how it could get worse. They were even blaming the peeping tom at the Schmidt's on us.

She smiled and pushed the screen door open. "Do you think it needs mowing today."

I glanced at the tall Bermuda grass and said "Yes mama. I'll get your mower out of the shed."

She said "I wish I could pay you. Virgil would do it, but his heart is giving him trouble. He would like to go to the army like Kenneth, but they won't take him."

I could tell she would like to have the remark about Kenneth back, but it was too late. I waived and walked down the steps and around the house. I drug the door over the piled-up dirt in front of the shed. The sunlight cut a swath into the dark little room illuminating the cobwebs and the dark corner where the rats lived. In spite of the heat I shuddered. Two things I hate are rats and spiders. I held my breath and drug the rusted reel mower out. Looks like they could put motors on these things.

An hour later I checked the yard to if I had missed any spots. Sweat rolled down my face and glistened off my body. My sweat damp short pants clung to me like a politician on my chest when I had the croup. Visions of the river floated in my head until I hit a cobweb that brought me back to reality. I pushed the mower in the shed and slammed the door shut. Even though I was exhausted I trotted around to the front of the house to get away from the rat-infested, spider packed shed.

Mrs. Sublit handed me a glass of cool water. I knew they couldn't afford ice for their box, but the tap water did taste good.

I said "thanks."

Mrs. Sublit said, "Virgil is going to go to work next month and then I can pay you."

I had been mowing their grass for two years and every time she said Virgil was going to work next month. I handed the glass back and said, "that's good but I'm glad to

mow your lawn."

Mrs. Sublit said, "You and Dougie are in a lot of trouble. You are the second worst boys we ever had in Carrville."

I spun around and asked. "Who was worse?"

Mrs. Sublit smiled. "Ranger Purvis and Judge Garrette."

My face hurt from the smile that split it. I would like to give this information to Ranger Purvis and Judge Garrett, but I figured I better keep my mouth shut.

I was still smiling that evening in my tree house. The sun was setting and a breeze had come up off the river. I tried to read, but my mind drifted off as I remembered Ranger Purvis knowing where our hideout was.

A fly buzzed around me but I ignored him. It was too hot to swat at flies. Staying home all the time wasn't too bad. I caught up on reading the Life Magazines I got from Mrs. Bedingfield's boarding house. Mother had taken me to the library to check out some books. She was big on education and reading was the most important part she said.

A rock sailed over the edge of my tree house and plunked on the floorboards. I spun around and peeked through a crack in the wall. If Hector Rodriguez was after me, all bets were off on this being a good situation. Same went for Nelson Gilbert. Those two had made my life miserable.

Another rock sailed over the wall and plunked against my right leg and fell through the boards. Whoever it was had me zeroed in. I looked for ammunition but there was nothing but a peach seed. I grabbed it and glared at the wall of vegetation in Mrs. Butt's back yard.

"Burr? Burr." Dougie's imitation of a stage whisper shattered the silence.

“Dougie? Where are you?”

I saw the hackberry bushes wiggling and Dougie’s arm poked out, “here.”

I grunted. I remembered the smell of the sewage and the feel of the sun baking my brain. If I hooked up with Dougie again, we would be back in trouble and Purvis would get us.

“Dougie, get out of here. You know the town has ordered us to not play together.”

I felt like I was going to pee in my pants.

Dogie giggled. “That wasn’t the town, it was our mothers. The town is too busy looking for that spy.”

My mind whirled on the information he had given me. I would be better off if the town had sentenced me not to play with Dougie rather than my mother. Now I really did feel like I was going to wet my pants.

I whirled around and looked at the back door of our house. If Mother came out my goose was cooked. "Dougie you are really crazy. Get out of here." I said.

Dogie giggled like a girl. "I saw you mowing Mrs. Sublit’s lawn. I bet she didn't pay you. You are a real geek."

I ignored Dougie. We had been over this argument a thousand times in the last two years. I could never explain to him why I worked for no pay.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Let’s go hiking up on Taylor Mountain in the morning. We can leave before your mother gets up and be back before she’s home.” Dougie slipped through the hackberry bushes.

I wanted to run to the house. There was no way I was going to disobey my

mother, much less test Ranger Purvis. “No, I’m staying home.”

Dougie squatted beside the old outbuilding. “Okay, I’ll get Demmie to go with me. I got some .22 shells. I was going to kill some squirrels and rabbits in Old Man Armstrong’s pasture.”

The pain in my bladder evaporated. I hadn’t shot a .22 in two years. There weren’t any shells available because of the war. Mr. Masterson got shells from the police department.

“How many boxes?” I asked.

“Three.” He held the white Winchester shell boxes up in the light. That meant 150 rounds. My palms itched.

“I can’t get away from my mother,” I squeaked.

“Your Mother’s going to roll Red Cross bandages in the morning at the city auditorium. So is my mother and all the other women in town.” He scratched his right calf with his left big toenail.

I imagined the gentle kick of the rifle and the smell of gunpowder. This wouldn’t be disobeying. I wouldn’t be with Dougie in town. We would be out in Mr. Armstrong’s pasture. There was no way Mother would buy that technicality, but it helped me justify what I was going to do.

“We better meet on the creek somewhere. If anyone sees us together, they’ll call Ranger Purvis.” The memory of sewage smelled fresh in my mind.

Dougie said, “OK. I’ll meet you at the Travis Street bridge at seven.”

I watched the limbs shaking as Dougie disappeared in the brush. A tiny nagging doubt began in my mind. It became a full-grown screaming voice of reason. I pushed it

aside. Mother really didn't want me confined to our yard for a month. She was always making rules like that then forgetting she'd made them.

If I could sneak out before she got up and get back before she came home, I had a chance. My stomach tied up in knots. There was always Ranger Purvis.

I dug out my .22 from the closet and pulled off the cloth cover I had made for it. I wanted a leather gun case, but Daddy said it would be foolish to put a seven-dollar gun in a ten-dollar gun case. The little single shot glistened from the oil I had left on it for storage. There was no use keeping it in shooting condition when there were no shells. Now I had to clean the gun and wipe off the oil.

I was polishing off the last of the oil when I heard Mother slam the front door. I slipped the gun in the closet and grabbed a book. Daddy believed in guns, but Mother believed in books.

"William!" Mother yelled.

I walked from the room with the book in my hand. "Yes, ma'am?"

She dropped the sack of groceries on the table and smiled. "I heard you mowed Mrs. Sublit's yard."

My chest tightened with pride in spite of my attempt at humiliation. "Yes Mama."

"It won't let you off staying home."

I hoped my deflation wasn't too obvious. "Yes Mama."

She smiled, "What are you reading?"

A lie almost cleared my lips, but I knew how she felt about lying. "It's a war book."

I prayed I hadn't picked up one of the Hardy Boys books.



She took it from me and read the title. “You should read more of the classics. You’re ready for *Moby Dick*.”

I opened my mouth to tell her I read *Moby Dick* two years ago. One thing this summer had taught me was to keep my mouth shut, so I said, “Yes, ma’am. I’ll get it next time you take me to the library. Can you take me in the morning?”

She began to unload groceries. “No, I have to roll Red Cross bandages. I won’t be back until three o’clock.”

I walked back down the hall smiling. Maybe I should be a spy. Maybe I could catch the spy.

## Chapter Twelve

### THE HUNTERS

Dust puffed up each time I slammed my foot down on Travis Street. Sunlight poked over Taylor Mountain, lighting the tops of the pecan trees in Mr. Schmurber's yard. I liked the early morning. People hadn't messed up the world yet. I shifted my .22 and kept jogging.

Mother had still been asleep when I left. I had stuffed my pillows under the bedspread in case she looked in my room. I was counting on her not checking. If she came in my room and found me gone, I was dead meat. A shiver wriggled up my spine in spite of the sweat that had collected. The sun wasn't up but it was already hot. The little gun didn't weigh much but it felt like it had gotten heavier since I left home.

I was certain Mother wouldn't check in my room, but I was nervous that someone would tell her I was out. I cut through the alley and down into the creek bed. Travis Street

curved around and crossed the creek fifty feet below. I stopped and stared through a stand of ragweed at Dougie squatting beside the bridge. He was holding his bolt action rifle across his knees like he was Davy Crocket hunting a bear. I was jealous of his rifle. He razzed me about my single shot mainly because I was a much better shot than he was.

I lifted my rifle up and carried it at port arms. I slipped along the path toward Dougie. I didn't know if he was deaf, but most times he couldn't tell when anyone was sneaking up on him.

I reached out and touched his right ear.

He jumped up and dropped his rifle in the dirt. "Burr, I could have shot you."

A truck rumbled past, kicking dust up from the dried mud on the bridge. It had been a long time since the creek had flooded and nothing but caked dirt covered the bottom.

"You could've shot your toe off," I said. "Come on, let's get up the mountain." I led the way across the creek and away from the road. I didn't want anything to do with that road. Mother said the army was still patrolling Golf Road looking for the spy.

Two army trucks roared along the caliche road while we climbed the south slope of Taylor Mountain. It was no wonder the army couldn't catch the spy when they were making so much noise. Loose rocks rattled down the hill as we climbed to the top.

We had shot at bottles and cans all morning, but we hadn't found any game. The heat had everything with any brains holed up.

I turned and looked up the river valley toward the next town, Comfort. I was surprised at how close it seemed. Then I looked down the valley in the direction of Ingram, below Carrville, fried in the midmorning sun like a piece of steak in Mother's

frying pan.

“Wish we had brought some water,” Dougie grunted.

I sat on the ledge of a limestone outcropping sticking out of the yellow caliche.

“We can go down to Mr. Harrison’s and get a drink. There won’t be anyone at the slaughterhouse. They’re all in town at the meat market.”

Dougie cocked his right eyebrow. “I don’t know. If anyone catches us together and tells our mothers, we’ll have to hide like that spy.”

“You think there’s really a spy?” I asked, “Or are they just messing with us because they think we’re hicks?”

Dougie kicked a flint rock down the hill and watched it rattle into a grove of cedar trees. “I don’t care. The whole town is laughing at us. If I could get out of Carrville, I would.”

A single buzzard drifted over us, inspecting us for a possible meal. He caught another thermal and sailed out over the valley.

“Let’s go get some water. There’s that spring above the Harrison’s where we can get a drink without anyone seeing us.”

The trip downhill was easy but crossing the farm-to-market road was thrilling. We slid under the barbed-wire fence into the Harrison pasture just as a convoy of army trucks roared by. My stomach jumped into my mouth. If that jerk Lieutenant Simmons caught us, he’d turn us over to Ranger Purvis and we’d be dipping sewage in front of the entire town.

Dougie tumbled down the dirt bank into the creek bottom, ignoring the rocks and brush that whacked him. He sprinted across the shallow creek, sending geysers of water

splashing into the clear air. I shook my head. The soldier boys were long gone, and they were too stupid to catch us in Harrison's pasture but Dougie was afraid of being sent to the Catholic school. His Mother had threatened to send him to the nuns if he got into any more trouble.

Scum floated on the surface of the stagnant pools at the edges of the creek. Large chunks of moss hung suspended in the tepid water like monsters in a bad movie. In normal years the creek flowed swift and was two or three feet deep. The draught had taken a lot out of the country.

"Come on, Burr. Those soldiers might come back." Dougie disappeared into the brush, popping cedar and scrub oak branches as he ran up the hill.

I grinned. He was headed in the wrong direction. There was nothing up that hill except more cedar and prickly pear. Dougie had no idea where he was or where the spring was. He was going in the wrong direction, but he was making good time.

Dougie popped out of the brush fifty yards upstream. I trotted down the creek. My rifle had been a light load when I left the house but now it felt as heavy as a real Army rifle must feel. Now I would have to carry it home.

Dougie stood beside a deer carcass covered with blow flies. I knew the Harrisons didn't kill deer out of season and I knew they wouldn't allow anyone to do it on their place either.

"Someone killed a deer out of season," Dougie mumbled.

Daddy killed a deer out of season last year, but I didn't tell Dougie. Dougie's tongue was loose on both ends and he'd tell anyone whatever he knew or suspected.

"Yeah, that must be what that buzzard was looking for." I looked up and our

friend in the sky had been joined by three of his brothers. I had no idea why, but I hated buzzards. I'd never shot one because Daddy told me he'd whip me if I did. He said they were Nature's garbage collectors.

"Wonder who it was." Dougie poked the carcass with his gun barrel.

I squatted and examined the deer. "Don't know who it was but he didn't know how to butcher a deer. He took the hams and left the back strap."

That didn't make sense. If one of the poachers in Carr County had killed it, he would have taken the backstrap first. Many times, Daddy had taken only the backstrap, the meat that ran either side of the backbone. It was the tenderest part of the deer.

"What should we do?" Dougie asked.

I walked around the deer. Large footprints led up the creek toward the spring. It looked like the deer had been killed last night, but if the poacher was in the pasture, I didn't want to run into him.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get out of here before we get blamed for killing this deer." I walked past the carcass and headed downstream.

Dougie said, "I need some water and don't feel like taking a chance on going to the Harrison's slaughterhouse. Let's get a drink from the spring and then go home." He headed through the brush up stream.

I hesitated. Something told me to go home, but if I did, Dougie would get lost and wouldn't get home before school started in September. I slung my rifle over my shoulder and followed him up the creek.

Dougie was across the creek on his belly slurping crystal clear water from the pool at the base of a limestone ledge. Story was that this spring had never gone dry even

in the worst drought. This summer was going to test that.

The creek had stopped running this far up and only stood in pools. The only place water trickled over the river rocks was where the spring ran into the creek. Clear spring water spilled over slippery limestone and gurgled into the rocks. The creek disappeared under the creek bed twenty feet downstream as if by magic.

I knew the creek was seeping under ground collecting in the pools. Most of the fish had died or been caught by the coons. I always wondered how the fish replenished themselves after a drought like this. Daddy said the birds brought fish eggs in on their legs.

Dougie stood and wiped water off his chin. He leaned back and placed his hand in a huge boot print.

“Wait!” I yelled.

Dougie spun away from the footprint like it was a rattler or a black widow spider. He searched the mud then glared at me. “What’s wrong with you?”

I pointed to the boot print imbedded in the soft dirt around the spring. “Who left that?”

Dougie stood and stared with me. “Could have been one of the Harrisons or some of their help.”

I shook my head. “I’ve been in this pasture since I was six and they never come up this far. They probably forgot this spring is here.”

Dougie looked at the oak limbs bobbing in the wind and stepped behind me as if there were unseen eyes watching us. I remembered Indian cave was close but didn’t mention that to him or he would get spooked.

There was no enemy visible, but there was a feeling that someone or something was watching us.

I backed away from the huge footprint and slipped into the brush. I had no way of knowing who had left this print and didn't want to know.

Dusk was settling over Carrville as if to soothe what the sun had burned. Soft shadows gathered around the houses and the brush looked like muted paintings from our World Books. I hadn't planned to stay this long, but Dougie had insisted on shooting at a deer we scared out of a thicket. I tried to explain we were in Mr. Anderson's pasture; it wasn't hunting season and we were supposed to be confined to our homes.

It looked like he missed, but I couldn't take a chance the deer was wounded. If it was, I would have had to kill it. My father had whipped the tar out of me for leaving a wounded deer to die in the woods. Next day he made me look in the cold rain until I found the animal and put it out of its misery. I will never forget the panic in the animal's eyes or it rolling over and trying to get up. It looked at me with those big brown eyes as if to ask what it had done to me that I would do such a thing to him.

He had missed the deer, but it put us late getting home. Mother had been home a couple of hours. If I didn't play this just right, I could be in worse trouble than Ranger Purvis catching me. All he could do was kill me.

I trotted up the alley that ran behind our house. Trees and bushes looked like monsters reaching to get me. I wondered if they could be a warning. It didn't matter. I couldn't get back any sooner.

I tiptoed up the fence between our chicken yard and Mrs. George's garden and into the back door of the garage. It was dark as the inside of a dead cow's belly in the old



building. I felt my way to the shelf behind the littered workbench jerking back from the hand full of spider webs I touched. An old oil can that hadn't had any oil in it in years clattered off the bench and crashed to the gravel floor. I looked out to see if Mother had heard, but there was no indication she knew I was just getting in.

I wrapped the rifle in an old blanket and took the copy of *Moby Dick* from the shelf. I dusted it off and opened it to the first page. "Call me Ishmael."

I really didn't think that would convince Mother that I had read the entire book, but it was all I had.

I could see her at the drain board washing dishes. My Mother didn't appear to be happy unless she was working. I didn't understand that but if she was happy so was I.

I stepped into the kitchen and tried to display *Moby Dick* without making it too obvious.

She turned and glared at me. "Where have you been?"

I stepped back from her. Someone must have told her they saw me out on Taylor Mountain. I had a lump in my throat, but I talked around it. "I have been reading *Moby Dick*."

Mother raised her right eyebrow and looked over her glasses. Either one of these moves could mean disaster but both could spell total annihilation.

"I called you. Where were you?" she asked.

I dropped into a cowhide-bottom chair and tossed the book on the table. This wasn't my trump card; it was my only card. If I couldn't sell her on my story I would have to run away and let Ranger Purvis catch me.

"I've been in the tree house reading *Moby Dick*." I could have bitten my tongue

off. Why did I push too hard?

She glanced at the book then back at me. “Why didn’t you answer me when I called?”

“I guess I fell asleep. I took a pillow up there. I’d like to sleep up there some night. I bet it would be cool.” I should never have listened to Dougie. It had sounded so easy when he said he had three boxes of shells. Dougie was the devil.

“You tried that two years ago and your father had to come out and get you.” She pulled a pan of golden-brown biscuits from the oven.

I swallowed. If I didn’t get her off the possibility of my being gone pretty soon, I was going to be dead. “Yeah, but I was just a little kid then.”

She slipped a piece of floured round steak into the skillet and moved it to one side. She slid another piece into the hot grease.

Maybe She had forgotten about me not being where she could find me. I held my breath, not wanting to attract her attention.

“Something about your story smells and I don’t mean like perfume,” she whirled and pointed a long fork at me like a knight ready to joust, “If I find out you disobeyed me, I’ll make you wish Purvis had made you dip out the sewage at the park.”

I clutched my crotch and crossed my legs. If I had to go to the bathroom now, she would know I was lying. Every time I got in trouble I had to pee.

“How do you pronounce this name?” I pointed to a name on the first page.

She hesitated then came across the room. My Mother was a sucker for a book.

“Queequeg? That’s *kweeg*. He’s one of the main characters. What did you think of the book?” A smile replaced her glare.

I was close. If I could slide her a little more information, I'd have her eating out of my hand. "I liked it, but I didn't read much. It's hard to read. The names are so hard."

She turned the steak and slid a pan of baked corn out of the oven. "Tonight, I'll help you with it. It'll be fun to read *Moby Dick* again."

I relaxed and released my crotch. She was humming, which was a good sign. I didn't want to read the book with her, but that was better than what it could have been.

I walked across the kitchen to turn on the radio but decided to go to my room and read as much of *Moby Dick* as I could.

I was still reading *Moby Dick* thirty minutes later when Mother called me to dinner. Usually, I don't like to put a book down even to eat but that one was easy to put down.

I sat in my favorite chair and looked across the table. Fried steak, mashed potatoes, baked corn and sliced tomatoes. I loved this dinner.

"You're sitting in your sister's place." Mother passed me a bowl of corn.

"She isn't here." I dipped out the golden corn and poured gravy over my mashed potatoes.

Mother smiled. "She's with Jimmy Edwards. She's supposed to be home in a few minutes."

The chair felt unusually comfortable since my sister was coming home. If she caught me in her place, we'd get in an argument but that would keep Mother from thinking about my being gone when she got home.

The front door banged shut and my sister came bouncing into the room. "Get out of my chair, squirt."

Mother looked up at me and lost her smile. I heisted, trying to gage how long I had to get out of the chair before she blew up.

She reached that point.

I grabbed my plate and slid around the table across from my sister. They had me surrounded. I felt like the Marines on Wake Island.

“Mother, Otto Biershwald said he saw Burr up on Taylor Mountain this afternoon. I thought you made him stay home for a month.” My sister grinned at me.

Before Mother could turn around and glare at me, I wiped the panic off my face and went on the offensive. “Taylor Mountain? Isn’t that where you and Jimmy go to park and mess around.”

The frown on Mother’s face was replaced by a glare. She forgot about me and whirled back to my sister. “Is that true?”

My sister tried to switch from the offense to defense but got caught in the switch. “He’s lying.”

Mother turned back to me. “William?”

I took a big bite of steak and chewed on it and built their suspense. Finally, I said, “I don’t know anything about parking or whatever it is, but Billy Cook and Charles Jatton were laughing about catching you and Jimmy up on Taylor Mountain.”

That ought to hold her for a while.

Tears formed in my sister’s eyes. “Mother, he’s lying.”

My Mother didn’t know which of us to believe. She ducked her head and began eating. I could barely hear her humming an old hymn.

My sister glared at me. I stuck my tongue out at her and grinned.

“Mother!” She yelled.

Mother continued to eat as if we were on the moon.

The next morning as I lay in my bed listening to the morning sounds, sunlight caught the edge of a cloud and turned it golden. Daddy called them Gulf clouds. He said no rain ever came out of them, they just drifted around the sky.

Mrs. George’s gray tabby cat dropped into our back yard and padded across the dust toward the house. A flash of white erupted from a mulberry tree. Before the cat could dart back under the cedar hedge the mockingbird slammed into him, knocking fur from his backside. I grinned.

The cat became confused and ran toward the middle of the yard rather than the hedge. The mockingbird banked in the still morning air and dropped on the cat like a dauntless dive-bomber at the Battle of Midway. Fur flew again.

The cat got straightened out but before he reached the hedge the mockingbird caught him again. The cat scooted under the limbs and glared out at the territorial bird squeaking at him from a mulberry limb.

The cat crouched and lay on his stomach. The bird squawked louder and dropped to one of the cedar limbs. I rose in my bed to yell at the stupid bird but it was too late. He dropped to a lower branch and the cat sprang. The beautiful bird fought, but he was no match for the cat. The cat disappeared into Mrs. George’s yard, proudly carrying the bird in her mouth.

I lay back down. I hated that cat almost as bad as I hated my sister’s cat. It wasn’t the cat’s fault. The mockingbird had been stupid. If he had stayed away from the low cedar branches he would still be alive.

It's a good idea to quit when you're ahead.

I walked into the kitchen still thinking about the bird and the cat. I had escaped from Mother's wrath yesterday. If I hadn't heard about my sister and Jimmy Edwards parking, I couldn't have held off Mother's questioning.

I poured milk over the corn flakes. I watched the flakes float to the rim of the bowl and added sugar. I decided I wasn't going with Dougie today. I had been lucky, and unlike that mockingbird, I was going to quit while I was ahead.

Mother walked through the room dressed like she was going to church. "This is the monthly meeting of the Methodist Ladies' Circle. I'll be at church until about three o'clock. There are leftovers in the refrigerator. If I catch you going out of our yard, you'll be in real trouble, young man."

She left me with a spoonful of cereal halfway to my mouth. She wasn't afraid of what I would do. She didn't want the town to know I hadn't minded her. I sucked the cereal in my mouth and listened to the flakes crunch in my head.

That cinched it. I was staying home even if I had to read *Moby Dick* all day.

## Chapter Thirteen

### A STUPID THING TO DO

My head nodded forward and dropped on my chest. It was still morning, but I was sleepy. I wasn't sleepy from lack of sleep, but I was bored with *Moby Dick*. I'd rather read stories by Jack London. It took Herman Melville pages and pages to tell one part of the story. If Captain Ahab wanted to kill the white whale, why did he have to go all over the world to do it?

"I knew you would chicken out," Dougie whispered from under my window.

I sprang up in my bed and dropped the book. "What are you doing here?" I asked. "We can't play together until we're twenty-five."

Dougie laughed and scooted under the rose bush like he didn't feel the thorns.

"You better get out here or they'll catch the spy without us."

I leaned against the window screen. "Where?"

"The river below Comfort. The army and all the law in Texas are over there. They've got him surrendered." Dougie jumped up to emphasize his point.

I didn't correct his mistake of *surrendered* instead of *surrounded*. "When do they

think they will get him?”

Dougie leaned his .22 against the wall and shrugged. “Papa didn’t say, but they got half the army down there. Let’s go.” In a clandestine whisper, he added, “This guy is some kind of *important* spy.”

The thought of all day with *Moby Dick* brought dark clouds into my mind. I had fooled Mother once, maybe I could get by one more time.

As I closed the book, Dougie said, “I got a box of shells left. I’ll tell you what, I’ll let you use my bolt action.” Dougie grinned.

I jumped from the bed and trotted down the hall. It was worth taking a chance on getting caught to get to use his bolt action instead of my single shot.

Halfway to the mountain I wished I were back at home with *Moby Dick*. Although we had taken the back alleys, we’d been seen by half-a-dozen women. The men were all watching the army try to catch the spy. The women were doing the laundry. I wasn’t afraid of the men telling on us, anyway. They just said, “Boys will be boys.” It was those women hanging wash on the line that worried me. I considered going back but decided I was already in the pot.

Without speaking, Dougie and I trotted out of the oak trees’ dark shade along the alley and into the sunlight. It would have been quicker to go directly up the hill on the farm-to-market road but we went to the creek from habit. We checked the muddy waterholes left in the dried-up creek bed.

Our bare feet splatted on the sunbaked path. Across the creek Willard Nelson and his gang were building a fort, but we didn’t pay attention to their taunts. Dougie lifted his rifle in the air and the boys dove for cover.



I giggled, thinking of the times Willard had whipped me and Dougie both. The chuckle died in my throat. Now the story would get out that we had threatened Willard and his buddies with a gun.

My giggle died in my chest as I struggled through the dead ragweed choking the creek bottom. Sweat rolled down my chest and collected in my short pants. It didn't make any difference what Willard said. We couldn't get into any more trouble. I shuddered, remembering the last time I had said that. It was amazing how wrong I could be.

Before we reached the base of Taylor Mountain, we spooked the Arnolds' milk cow grazing on a rope along the creek. She jerked the stake loose and ran up the creek. Spooking the cow was bad enough. If we chased her around, she would hold her milk back and the Arnolds would be without milk. I hated to think about how mad Mr. Arnold would get.

We caught the stupid old cow but couldn't get her back to the place where she'd been staked. She much preferred the Erikslabins' garden. Old Lady Erikslabin yelled at us, but I couldn't understand German and didn't wait around for an interruption.

The heat was heavy but the problems I had built up on the way up there weighed more. I remembered the mockingbird and wished I could change places. Being a cat's breakfast was a lot better than what I was going to get when I got home.

Dougie rested at Mr. Armstrong's fence. "You think Mrs. Erikslabin recognized us?"

"I don't know German, but I did understand *Burr* and *Dougie* when she was yelling at us. That, plus the Arnolds knew we ran off their cow. Then there are all the women who saw us coming up here. And to make it perfect, Willard will tell them how

you aimed your rifle at him.” I wanted to spit but my mouth was too dry.

“I didn’t aim the gun at Willard. I just raised it up where he could see it.”

Dougie’s words were directed at his feet making them hard to understand.

I shrugged. “Let’s go hunting. If our parents don’t kill us Ranger Purvis will make us dip out the pit. This could be the last hunting trip we get.”

Dougie looked at the ground. “I lied.”

“I’m sure you did, but what about?” My breath sounded like a hurricane whistling over my teeth. “Just give me some shells.”

Dougie rubbed the butt of his rifle. “I don’t have any more shells.”

I knew how angry my father had been the time he chopped the handle out of his favorite hammer. I was that mad at Dougie. “Why did you lie?”

Dougie sounded so pitiful. “I wanted you to come with me.”

I looked at the useless riffle and considered throwing it away. It had been heavy yesterday when I had shells. Now it felt as heavy as Mr. Powell’s anvil.

I stepped through the rusty barbed-wire fence and walked up the hill. “We’re here and caught. We might as well see what’s going on up top.”

When we got there, we found nothing. The rest of the day had gone about like the beginning. We were afraid to go to Harrison’s spring because of the big footprint. We had gone over to the slaughterhouse and got caught. One of the Harrison brothers had run us off, leaving us with another sighting for our parents to find out about. We were still thirsty and hungry when we got to the water hole on the third fairway. The hole had dried up and Mr. Mitchell had found all the golf balls so we couldn’t sell golf balls to buy an R C Cola.

I was desperate enough to go home and face Mother. We had no water and we had no food. We were in trouble with the entire town. She sounded like the safest port.

A single golf ball bounced over the dirt bank and into the rocks. We crouched behind a boulder and waited. I was in enough trouble without getting conked on the head by some tourist. A second, then a third and finally a fourth ball bounced into the rocks.

Golfers were so dumb. They tried to drive over the creek like Byron Nelson instead of hitting short. Dougie and I sprinted for the four balls. If we could get them before the golfers reached the bank, we'd have drinking and eating money.

I clutched the balls as I jumped from rock to rock and scooted under the fence and out onto the bridge. One of the golfers yelled at us but we disappeared into the dried ragweed and took off down the creek.

The trek to Carson's Store had been hot but worth it. I could taste the R. C. Cola and the Moon Pie. Shooting had been fun but cereal and milk at breakfast hadn't lasted too long.

Mrs. Carson glared at us as we walked in the store. She opened her mouth to tell us not to fight again but a skinny girl in a feed sack dress put some groceries on the counter.

The girl was crying, and Mrs. Carson was pulling the groceries across the counter.

The girl said. "We don't have anything to eat, and this is all the money momma has."

Mrs. Carson was a staunch Baptist, but she shook her head and checked to see if me and Dougie had enough money.

I counted the change on the counter and asked. "How much more do you need?"

Tears made furrows on her face and tugged at my soul. "I only need six cents."

I felt the cold R.C. Cola and the soft Moon pie. The nickel was stuck in my sweaty hand. I shrugged and dropped the coins on her change and glared up at Mrs. Carson. The old woman returned my glare and pushed the groceries to the girl.

Dougie's mouth was open wide enough to catch a grown eagle much less flies. "Burr Hobbes you are one stupid geek. I'm not giving you any of my R. C. Cola and Moon Pie."

I shrugged and carried the ice cold bottle and warm pie back to the cooler.

When I caught Dougie, he said around a mouthful of moon pie, "She didn't even thank you."

The shame on her face at having to take money from a stranger reminded me of momma taking relief when daddy couldn't get a job.

Dougie gulped the last of the R.C. Cola and tossed it on the ground. It was worth two cents, but my stomach had already eaten a hole in itself. Shade outside Carson's IGA Grocery Store was stretching to the east. Mother would be home in an hour. It didn't matter. Everyone in Carrville would be calling her to tell her what a bad boy she had, and what about her telling me to stay home for a month.

"You ready to go home?" Dougie asked.

"No, I don't ever want to go home. It isn't the spanking I might get so much as it is being humiliated in front of the whole town when we dip out the park outhouse."

Dougie looked through the dirty screen into the store. "Let's run away from home."

I couldn't have been any more shocked if he had suggested we go to the moon. "Are you crazy?"

Tears welled up in Dougie's eyes. "I'm not dipping out the park privy. Daddy said Lester Veltman dipped it out when he was a kid and they still call him Outhouse."

"Where would we go?" I asked.

"I hear they need peach pickers over in Fredricksburg. We can go over there and pick peaches. Then we could go east and north and pick cotton. By winter we could have a car and a house." Dougie dried his tears with the back of his hand and grinned hopefully.

I didn't have the heart to tell him neither of us could drive and if we did get to Fredricksburg, they'd arrest us and bring us back.

I said, "We could stay out tonight."

Dougie dusted the crumbs off his short pants and stared across the caliche street. "We could sleep on General Taylor's grave."

General Taylor who had donated the land for the school had his family's graves on top of the hill. That's why we called it Taylor Mountain. It wasn't a mountain only a hill like the other broken limestone hills around Carrville, but we called it a mountain.

As I talked, I dug through my brain for a reason not to run away from home. "It will get cold up there and we don't have any cover."

Dougie ducked his head so I couldn't see the tears building in his eyes. "That's better than being called *Outhouse* all your life." He took a few steps back toward the farm-to-market road leading to the hill. "If you don't come, I'm going without you," he said.

Dougie was serious. I watched him plow his bare toes through the dusty street. He looked like he shrunk as he drooped along toward Taylor Mountain. I had done a lot of

stupid things in my life, and this was going to be one of them.

“Wait up!” I called to him. I trotted up the street wondering if I could plead insanity.

## Chapter Fourteen

### SAFE BUT SPOOKY

We needed food so we took empty bottles from behind Carson's store and sold them at Mrs. Ross's Red-and-White store. We got enough money to buy bologna, bread and an R.C. Cola apiece. I remembered Mother's fried chicken and peach cobbler and decided that independence was highly overrated.

Going up the hill felt more and more like a mountain. My breath came in gasps and sweat rolled out of my hair into my eyes. Climbing to the top of Taylor Mountain had been a good idea at the bottom. On top it was a lot like running away from home — a bad idea.

Dougie stood on the road circling the top of the hill and looked across the valley. The sun was a red ball descending behind the far hills. I was glad the sun was going down but that brought another problem. No lights.

I burped the gas off the bologna sandwich and wished I had another RC Cola. There was no way we could bring up water to the top of the hill and I was dry as a Baptist Sunday School picnic.

The sun was gone, leaving the wilted world it had broiled all day. Twilight crept through the streets of Carrville looking for a place to stay. The muted darkness collected around structures and under trees. Lights flickered on like lightning bugs on a June evening. Streetlights burst on like it was Christmas.

I found the steeple of the Methodist Church and knew that my house was across the street. At least it had been my house when I left this morning. By now Mother had figured out I had dumped *Moby Dick* and was running lose. I hated to do that to her. Although she aggravated me, she was a good Mother and tried to raise me right.

Dougie sailed a rock off the hill and watched it dip into the live oak trees at the base of the hill. Somewhere down there Mr. Armstrong's house was under the trees. If we hit his house, we would have one more enemy.

One more enemy didn't sound too bad. They could only kill me once.

"Where you want to sleep?" Dougie asked.

I shrugged and looked east. Black clouds rolled like my stomach felt trying to digest the bologna sandwich. Thunder rumbled up the valley and lightning danced across the face of the cloud. This was a different story. I hadn't come along for a thunderstorm or worse a hailstorm. The underside of the cloud was a sick pale green like the storm we had last year. That one tore off roofs and killed young sheep and goats.

I had seen hailstorms strip the limbs off good sized trees and flattened wheat fields.

I said, "We better get home. That looks like a bad storm." I stepped toward the edge of the road.

Dougie grunted, apparently weighing a hailstorm against a lifetime of ridicule.



“I’m not going home,” he said. “We can find a place out here to hole up.” His eyes looked as wild as Aunt Bertha’s before they took her to the Asylum in San Antonio.

I looked down the hill at the cedar and prickly pair, the boulders and caliche rocks that covered the steep incline. If I tried to outrun the storm, I’d end up at the bottom of the hill in worse shape than if I was caught in a hailstorm.

“I don’t know, Dougie, that looks like a bad storm. Remember a couple of years ago when that storm stripped all the trees in town. It knocked off roofs and broke windows.” I wasn’t sure it had been that bad, but I wanted to force him to go home.

He walked to the huge cement graves and stood on one of them. He looked like Captain Ahab when *Moby Dick* breached. I had never seen Dougie like this.

Cold wind slammed into my face. It was too late to beat the storm home and I couldn’t think of any place to hide between here and there.

“We can’t stay up here,” I said, “Where can we go?” I dropped beside him and watched jagged lightning stab the next hill. I tried to count to see how far away it was, but the lightning and thunder ran together. The yellow underside of the storm appeared to roll and explode.

“We could go to Indian Cave,” Dougie said.

I nearly fell off the grave. There was no way Dougie would go near that hole in the ground.

“What?” I wanted to make sure I had understood him.

Dougie stood up and walked toward the fence around the graves. He pushed the gate open. “You heard me,” he said. “We can ride out the storm in Indian Cave and then hitchhike to Fredricksburg in the morning.”

None of us little kids and most of the big kids would go into Indian Cave. We called it Indian Cave because of the graffiti inside. A man from the University at Austin said it wasn't Indian writing, though. He said it was just vulgar sayings and words.

I didn't care. I wasn't interested in spending the night or five minutes in Indian Cave. Dougie and I had tried to go in there once but chickened out. We hadn't stopped running until we were on the road at the base of the hill.

We didn't go up the hill for a year and then we didn't go around on the side where the cave was. Older boys had told us there were evil spirits in the cave and I believed them. There were few people in Carrville who knew its exact location. Most were smart enough to stay away.

I trotted down the steep road slicing around the hill. Dougie was ahead of me running like a spotted ape. Cold wind slammed rock-hard raindrops against my bare back. Indian Cave might have evil spirits, but they were down the hill and this storm was here and now.

I dropped on my butt and down the gulley toward the cave entrance. It was impossible to see the entrance until you were on it. A stunted cedar bush slammed into my face welling tears in my eyes. A large limestone boulder loomed ahead of me like a Panzer tank. I rolled sideways and bounced off the edge of the huge rock.

Dougie stood in a gully strewn with white limestone rocks that looked like peeled potatoes. The arroyo was powder dry with the drought, but if it came a frog-strangler the ditch could have three or four feet of water rushing toward the creek.

I rolled onto matted Spanish oak leaves packed into a soft blanket. Under this big oak might be as good as inside the cave.

Lighting split a huge cedar tree on the crest of the hill, sending sparks and flames flying in the gusting wind. I sprinted past Dougie toward the entrance to the cave, not afraid of evil spirits or live Indians.

Rain slashed at the canopy of treetops overhead, pounding the limbs and bending the tops toward the southwest. Cold rain splatted against me, puddling in the dirt and grim collected on my skin. Dougie passed me but I didn't care. This wasn't a race unless we were talking about a race for life.

A limestone boulder jugged into the dry gully like an abutment of a fort. We were almost there. I slowed and grinned.

A roaring like the daily Southern Pacific in low gear crashed into the hillside. Hail stones the size of golf balls slashed through tree limbs and cascaded into the arroyo. One bonked me on the head, and another slammed my chest. All around me the world was white driving hail. I swung around the corner and slammed into Dougie.

He stood at the entrance of the cave, shaking like a dog trying to pass a peach seed. His eyes were big as saucers. Tears rolled down his face. He held his clenched hands at his side, pounding his legs as if this would drive the hail away.

"Come on!" I yelled.

Dougie said something, but I couldn't hear him because of the noise from the hailstorm.

A large Spanish oak limb tore loose and flew through the air like Superman in the Saturday serials at the movies.

I hesitated. A hailstone the size of a hen's egg slammed into my left calf. I almost lost my footing. Pain shot up my leg. To heck with Indian Cave and evil spirits. I shoved

Dougie aside and dove into the dark hole. The noise and turmoil of the hailstorm faded. The cave felt soft and silent. Too silent.

Dougie screamed. I crawled on my hands and knees to the entrance. Dougie held his head, blood oozing between his fingers. Hailstones were slamming into him like ping-pong balls in the bingo hopper at the Catholic Church on Saturday night.

I reached out for him and got smacked by a large hailstone. Dougie screamed and danced around like a wounded Sioux Indian at the Battle of the Little Big Horn must have, only he wasn't winning.

I grabbed him by his shorts and jerked him over the boulder at the entrance. He flipped into the silence and fell on top of me. Mother had told me to be a Good Samaritan every day but saving Dougie from himself might be asking too much.

Dougie yelled and flailed his arms and legs but wouldn't get off me. I scooted from under him and leaned against the wall. A shaft of gray light from the entrance drove through the dark cave but didn't light it. My eyes adjusted and I could see we were in a low-ceiling chamber about twenty feet wide. I couldn't see how far back it went, but I didn't care, since that's probably where the Indian spirits lived. I slipped toward the front, but Dougie was screaming and thrashing and blocking the entrance.

"Get up, Dougie. You're not hurt," I growled.

Dougie clung to the side of the cave and slid up erect. "I'm not afraid of being hurt. It's the evil spirits in here that I'm trying to keep off me." He sprang to the mouth of the cave.

Lightning hit out in the driving hail, illuminating the cave for a second. Dougie fell back on the cave floor.

I grunted. “It’s better to be in here with a few evil spirits than out there with that hail and lightning.”

Dougie lay on the floor like the bandit who couldn’t figure out if he wanted to be hung or shot. Hailstorm or evil spirits, either way he was dead.

As quickly as the storm had rolled into Bolyn Creek Valley, it rumbled over Taylor Mountain and into downtown Carrville. Silence was broken by distant thunder rumbling down the draw, water dripping from the trees and roaring past in the gully floor. A caliche rock broke lose from the side of the gully and dropped into the boiling dirty water. I glanced up at the sky but saw only blackness. A rotten hackberry limb floated past in the cauldron of churning, dirty water headed for the creek like a steamboat on the Mississippi.

Over Carrville, lightning flashed and thunder rolled up the valley, roaring like a runaway truck. Carrville was getting what we’d been through. Mother was getting what we just had only she didn’t have a cave to hide in.

I crouched to jump out of the cave and go help her but was stopped by Dougie’s hand. I fell apart like a wounded jackass. Tears exploded from my eyes, and I bawled like a calf who had lost his mama at feeding time.

Dougie’s eyes loomed out of the cave like a barn owl. “What is wrong with you?” he asked.

I jerked away from him. “I don’t know. I disobeyed my mother and can’t go home. We stole golf balls at the golf course. We swiped bottles from Mr. Carson and sold them at Ross’s store. We barely got in this hole in the hill before a hailstorm killed us. My Mother is by herself in this mess when I should be home with her. I am in a cave

that's haunted by dead Indians and to boot I'm in all this with a complete idiot."

Dougie blinked. "It stopped hailing."

"Yeah, it's stopped hailing here. It's knocking the devil out of Carrville where we live or did until you got us run out of town." I kicked at a metal object in the floor of the cave.

Dougie swelled up and clinched his fists like he did before a fight. "I didn't get us run out of town; you did."

I held up my hand and picked up the object. It was a metal belt buckle. An eagle spread across the front of the large buckle and there were words below it. I tried to read them, but they were either not in English or were words I couldn't read.

"Forget it, Burr Hobbs. I'm whipping you good this time." Dougie cocked his fist and stepped toward me.

I held the buckle to the light and squinted. "Wait! This is some kind of belt buckle."

Dougie and I studied the buckle. We couldn't figure it out. We turned it over. On the back it said Lieutenant Kurt Werner, 1932.

Who would leave a belt buckle in here and who was Kurt Werner. I rubbed the buckle as if it were a magic lamp. Colonel Kurt Werner exploded in my mind.

"Dougie, Kurt Werner is the escaped POW they are looking for!" I yelled much louder than I intended.

Dougie puffed up because I had found the buckle and identified it. "He's a colonel. That says lieutenant."

“Yeah, but this buckle also says 1932. He could be a colonel by now.” Suddenly, I wasn’t afraid of evil spirits. Live German Colonels were a lot more frightening.

“I thought they caught him on the river by Comfort,” Dougie whispered.

I cocked my head trying to hear how far away the hailstorm was. “Maybe they missed him,” I said. “The army and that FBI agent couldn’t catch a cold in a norther.”

“Dougie’s eyes got bigger. “Yeah, but they had Ranger Purvis with them. He could catch anybody.”

“No. He had to go to the border yesterday. Those cops and soldiers and Agent Tullar are a bunch of dummies.” I wondered if criticizing the United States Army and the FBI was treason. I decided it didn’t matter. What did matter was getting into town and telling the authorities about this buckle in the cave.

A mental picture of the reception we would get in Carrville came to mind. If I lived long enough to get past my mother, the cops or the FBI or the soldiers would kill both of us. Our credibility was at an all-time low, and it never was very high.

“Let’s take it into town.” Dougie pushed past me to the entrance.

I grabbed him and stopped him. “If we go waltzing into Carrville now, the townspeople are going to tar and feather us.”

Dougie recoiled at the threat of tar and feather. “What are we going to do?” he whispered.

I sat on a large rock beside the wall to think. My hand dropped onto a wooden box. I moved it aside and found a gasoline lantern. I didn’t think Indian spirits used gasoline lanterns. I leaned farther and almost fainted. The stock of a military rifle was leaning against the wall. I stood up before I could find anything else.

“Dougie, we only thought we were in trouble before. There’s a rifle and a lantern and a wooden box against this wall. This is that POW’s hiding place.” My voice broke and I wasn’t ashamed for showing such weakness.

Dougie felt his way across the floor of the cave and bumped into the cache. He began to whimper like a sick pup.

“What are we going to do?”



## Chapter Fifteen

### ANOTHER BAD IDEA

“The first thing we’re going to do is get out of here,” I answered. “I don’t care what the town or the cops or anyone else does to me. I want to get out of here before he comes back.” I slid my feet along the dust in the cave floor until I reached the opening.

Outside stars sparkled like diamonds in the black velvet sky. It looked like it had never rained. The air smelled new. Then I looked down the muddy hill to the gully running with two or three feet of water. Water dripped from the trees and the ground was covered with drifts of glistening hail.

It looked like a Christmas scene from a horror movie. The bad part was that we were in a haunted cave and that wasn’t the worst. Out there somewhere was a Nazi spy and an escaped POW who were coming back to get their stuff. They were coming to get their stuff and would find a couple of dumb kids in *their* cave.

“Let’s get out of here,” Dougie said.

I pointed at the water rushing down the hill. “The only way out of here is down that gully. The water is at least three feet deep. We’ve got to wait for it to go down.”

Dougie leaned out past me and pointed in the dark. “We could go over the side of the hill to the road.” His breath came in gasps.

Piles of hail showed through the dark like white clumps of sheets when the wind blew Mother’s wash down. I couldn’t see in the dark, but I knew the sides of the gully were soaked and muddy. If we tried to climb out over the side, we would slide back into the rushing water below.

“Not now, Dougie. We have to wait until the water goes down, then we can escape down the gully to the road and get to town that way.” It sounded so easy.

I wanted to point out that if the spy and the escaped POW came back, we wouldn’t have to worry about muddy slopes or cold water. They would cut our throats and dump us at the back of the cave.

Cold wind blew up the gully sending a wave of chill bumps over me. I pulled back inside the cave and turned to where I hoped Dougie was.

He said, “Burr, you’ve got us in a lot of trouble. When we get out of here, I’m gonna whale you so bad you won’t quit hurting for a month.” His voice quivered.

Any other time I would be afraid if Dougie threatened to whale me, but not today. “I tell you what, Dougie. If we get out of this one, I’ll help you whale me.”

I could see Dougie’s face in the half-light from distant lightning. He opened his mouth then shut it. He shook his head and sat on the box beside the gun.

I felt the lantern, but the chimney was cold. The men must have gone out before the storm and got caught. I hoped the hailstorm had killed them. I knew they were the

enemy, but I felt as guilty as the time I got mad at my grandfather for teasing me and I prayed he'd die. He died a week later, and I knew it was my fault.

"Get up, Dougie, and let's see what's in the box." I bumped him and dodged a left hook.

The lantern rattled in the dark as I sat it in the dust. I lifted the top of the box but couldn't see anything in the dark. I shoved my hand into a loaf of bread, what felt like cheese, an ax and a flashlight.

I grabbed the light and flicked it on.

The cave exploded into light. Dougie blinked and stepped back. "Turn that off, you fool."

I grinned. It wasn't often I got Dougie in a bad spot, but this was one and I didn't mind taking advantage of it. I moved and the shaft of light reached back into the cave to an opening too small for a grown man to go through. Beyond that, the darkness swallowed the beam. I decided that was where the spirits lived. I'd stay where I was.

"Let me see the light." Dougie grabbed for the light.

The light clattered against a large rock and fell behind the box. The room was thrown into instant darkness again. Before the dark had been bad, but now it was worse. I fumbled for the flashlight and dug it out.

I dropped my voice as low as I could and prayed no one outside heard me. "Be careful, Dougie, we've got to put this stuff back like it was or they'll know we were here and come after us."

Dougie was afraid of the dark, but the threat of them coming after us made him manageable. I studied the contents in the box. Ammunition for the rifle, string, rope,

blankets. I took a handful of matches and stuck them in my pocket. They wouldn't miss a few of them. I picked up an expensive looking pocketknife and slipped it into my other pocket. It wasn't stealing if it came from a German spy or POW.

Then, there it was, some kind of short-wave radio covered with a blanket to keep the dust off. It had to be the radio everyone was looking for. If I could get Ranger Purvis up here, he could capture these guys. I remembered the sewage and shuddered. Maybe them escaping was the best idea. If they got away it wouldn't hurt as bad as dipping out that pit with the barrel.

Dougie grabbed me. "What is that?"

Wind moaned in the trees outside. Cold air blew in the mouth of the cave and chilled me. I wished we could build a fire, but I knew they would see it. I touched the blankets but knew they would catch us if we took one of them, too.

"It's only the wind," I said confidently.

The moaning wasn't outside. It was inside the cave. It was coming from the small hole where the spirits lived. I backed closer to the cave entrance. To heck with the spy and POW, I'd take them over the dead Indians any day.

I stuck my head out into the night. Someone speaking German was laughing and scrambling in the muddy gully.

A higher voice yelled a reply.

The deep voice laughed and said, "All right, Reinhardt. I'll speak English. It is cold and I am getting wet. Now, is that any better in English than German?"

Reinhardt answered, "You are making fun of me, but tomorrow you must get from here to the coast to meet U-two-four-eight. The more you speak English the easier it

will be for you to fool the authorities.”

The deep voice laughed again. “This country is a joke. The entire German Army could invade it, and no one would stop them. There is no security.”

Reinhardt said, “They call it freedom. It is that freedom that will defeat them and make Germany the ruler of the world.”

The big voice chuckled. “You haven’t seen combat. The Americans are good soldiers if they have good leaders, and their material is unbelievable.”

Reinhardt said, “Kurt! That is traitorous.”

I could hear them splashing around the corner of the boulder. They would be inside the cave in seconds. I shoved Dougie to the back of the cave, replaced the flashlight and flipped the lid shut. I fumbled with the top of the box and set the lantern on it.

Dogie struggled with me in the dark to stay nearer the entrance. The moaning coming from the hole convinced me to take on the Krauts. Then a man’s large head was silhouetted in the cave opening. He smelled the air like an animal.

“Hurry up, Kurt, I’m freezing out here,” Reinhardt said.

Dogie moved uneasily back toward the hole. A few spirits weren’t as bad as the size of the man in the entrance. I crawled along the floor until I found the hole at the back of the cavern. I was more afraid of the known at the cave entrance than the unknown through the hole. I had heard of cliffs in caves dropping off thousands of feet and raging underground rivers. I didn’t care. There was a giant at the entrance.

I stuck my hand into the total blackness and couldn’t see anything. Dogie pushed against me and whimpered.

Kurt bellowed, “Did I leave the lantern on this side of the box? And look, the rifle is knocked over. Someone has been here.” He sounded like Father Bear in “The Three Bears” when he found his porridge tampered with. I would have gladly taken on the three bears or all the bears in the world to avoid the big German.

I heard someone pumping the gas lantern. In seconds the cave would light up like the rodeo on the Fourth of July. We would be sitting out there like the frogs we put in the punch at the church social. I heard the mantle of the lamp slip up and someone struck a match. The wick caught and, like magic, light filled the room.

I was shocked at the size of the cavern. It was bigger than our living room, and on the far side, the ceiling rose up like a chimney to the dark.

Dougie began to blubber. I grabbed at his mouth from behind but missed. The Germans wheeled around like a Panzer division going through France.

Dougie screamed.

“What was that?” Reinhardt asked.

Kurt laughed. “Looks like we have two visitors who came in out of the hailstorm. I thought you said no one knew about this place.” His voice had started soft and friendly but by the end, it would have taken paint off at a hundred yards. My hair stood up and I felt for the hole to the back of the cave. Indians’ spirits were terrifying, but they sounded better than that big German.

“Vot are ve going to do?” Reinhardt whined.

Kurt sprang across the room like a big cat and grabbed Dougie. I slipped my feet through the hole first and wiggled back. I prayed if there were any Indian spirits, they would be gentle with a small Methodist boy who always pulled for them at the movies on

Saturday afternoon when they fought the cowboys.

Dougie screamed again. Kurt shoved him aside and grabbed at me. He caught my short pants and ripped the back pocket off. I slowed but kept on moving. I didn't care if he pulled me naked, I was getting away from that giant.

"Damn, the little one got away. Where does that tunnel go?" Kurt demanded.

Reinhardt whimpered. "It doesn't go anywhere."

"He is slippery like a snake. I hate snakes and Texas is full of them. We should kill them all."

Reinhardt said, "You? Afraid of snakes?" His laugh made me think of a weasel.

Kurt grunted. "No, let us see if vee can get de little urchin out of dare." The more he talked the worse his English got.

He held Dougie like a rag doll and stuck his huge arm through the hole. He felt around, but I slipped away into the blackness. I never thought I would be happy to be in the darkest part of Indian Cave, but I was.

Kurt grumbled, "If he gets out and into town, he vill have all de soldiers in Texas looking for me."

I could hear Dougie whimpering but couldn't understand him. Cold wind whistled down from above and chilled me. I dug in my pocket for the matches. If I could find some wood, I could build a fire and see what was around me. I might not want to know, but it was really cold. I'd make sure I didn't end up with snow over my fire like the guy in Jack London's story, "To Build a Fire."

"Let us smoke him out, ya?" Kurt's big voice boomed.

I could hear them rattling around but was afraid to crawl to the rim of the hole to

see what was going on. Someone threw wood against the hole. More wood was piled on. A light flickered. The wood caught. I peeked out and saw them dropping green branches on the fire. One of those two was a pretty smart cookie. I had done the same thing to smoke a varmint out of hollow tree.

I heard them laughing and someone flapping what sounded like a blanket to drive the smoke into my hiding place. Smoke blew into the cavern but met the cold air from above and spread out like fog in the morning. I covered my mouth but still couldn't breathe. If they kept this up, I'd have to surrender or croak. I backed up the wall in the dark to avoid the smoke. I felt dry twigs and branches against my bare back. If they could start their fire, then I could start mine. I struck a match and found what looked like a dried rats' nest. I held the match to the nest and jumped back when it exploded into flame. I tossed on small twigs and larger branches.

I had a pretty good fire going but the smoke was beginning to cover the ledge I was on. I found a dry cedar limb and stuck it in the fire. It caught and filled the cavern with light. I was on a ridge that curled up into the dark. I held my torch over the side of the ridge but couldn't see the bottom. I tossed a rock down and waited for it to hit bottom. Finally, a faint tap came back, sending the hair on the back of my neck straight up. If I went off that ridge, I was a goner.

I considered going back through the hole and giving up, but I knew if I did, Dougie and I were dead as a steer over at Mr. Harrison's slaughterhouse. I also knew that this guy had information that could set the invasion of Europe back a year and cause a lot of people to die.

I lifted the torch. I couldn't see what was at the top of the ridge, but I did know



what was back through the hole and over the side. I began to climb, praying I didn't slip.

The trail got steeper. The torch grew dimmer. I slipped but caught myself on a rock. Below me in the dark were the evil spirits that I had heard about. Mother said if I got a ball of fear in my throat, chew it down to size. She had never had a giant German on one side, evil Indian spirits and a cliff on the other.

The torch went out. Tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't go back and surrender. I couldn't see what was ahead of me. All around me was blacker than the inside of a dead cow's belly.

I blinked. I was seeing things. It looked like stars twinkling in the top of the cave. How could that be? Cold air swept over me. I reached forward and grasped a rock. I pulled up. The ledge got narrower. I looked back and down. I was between a rock and a hard place.

I pulled up higher. The air around me was colder and smelled fresh. The air in the cave had been warm and stale. I heard a dog bark. If I could get up to that hole, I could pull myself out and run for help. I had a vision of my reception in town that included Ranger Purvis and a giant bucket. I pushed the vision aside. First things first.

I caught the lip of the opening and pulled. The rock came loose, and I teetered over the edge of blackness. One inch farther and they could bury me, if they found me.

The edge of the opening was crumbly caliche over limestone rock. If I tried to lift myself out on the caliche I would fall and crash in the dark.

There had to be a solution.

## Chapter Sixteen

### ALMOST ARRESTED

I knew I had to dig a handhold in the limestone. I scratched the crumbly yellow dirt off the lip of the cave. When I got down to the limestone, I pulled out the German's pocketknife and opened it with my teeth. It didn't take long to scratch out a handhold. I flipped the knife ahead of me and grabbed onto the rock and pulled.

My head popped out into the night air like a turtle snapping at a crawdad. Before the hailstorm the day had been hot as the inside of a Sunday-dinner oven. Now the storm had cleaned and cooled the air.

I pulled myself out and slipped on the mud. I scooped up the pocketknife and stumbled into banks of hailstones piled up in shallow indents in the ground. More hail was caught against tree trunks and rocks like one of the times it snowed in Carrville.

Below me water rushed down the gully. The lights from Carrville made the hill look like it had a halo. That's where I had to go to get help before the Germans killed Dougie and ran off to catch their U-boat back to Germany.

It would have been easier to slide down the slope and into the gully but that's

where the Germans were. I teetered along the ridge that ran to the top of Taylor Mountain. I couldn't see the bottom, but I knew it was 300 feet to the boulders at the bottom. If I fell off the ridge in either direction, I could forget about getting help for Dougie. I inched along as fast as I dared.

I finally staggered down off Taylor Mountain and into town. There were few cars and fewer pedestrians on the streets. If someone recognized me, I would be in real trouble.

I squatted in the mud under the bushes that lined the courthouse wall. It looked like control headquarters for the spy hunt had shifted from City Hall to the courthouse. There were army trucks and soldiers everywhere. They were all carrying guns. This was real. If I didn't get them out there fast, Dougie was dead meat.

Agent Tullar stumbled out of the courthouse followed by Lieutenant Simmons. The lieutenant had been bossy the last few days, but now he was kowtowing to the colonel from the other day who was chewing out everyone in sight.

The colonel said, "You have been up here with unlimited resources, and you can't catch one spy and one escaped prisoner." His words were colder and hurt Lieutenant Simmons more than the hail could have.

"Yes, sir, Colonel Newton. We...." Lieutenant Simmons started.

"Oh, shut up. And you, the Federal Bureau of Investigation," Colonel Newton mocked, "you people couldn't find your butt in a barrel with both hands." His rage drove Agent Sam Tullar down the steps.

I hated Agent Tullar and Lieutenant Simmons for shaming me, but I felt sorry for them. Colonel Newton was a real tough guy. He was short, his jaw stuck out and his legs

were bowed like a West Texas cowboy's. He reminded me of a bulldog.

The Sheriff and the civilian authorities hung back in the shadows not wanting to incur the wrath of the short man.

I cringed. Colonel Newton led Lieutenant Simmons and Agent Tullar to the bushes where I was hiding. He leaned close to them and whispered, "We aren't too worried about the spy. It's the escaped POW. He's in German intelligence, an SS Colonel named Kurt Werner, and may have seen the plans for the allied invasion of Europe. If he escapes, the entire operation will have to be re-planned. The delay would cost us a year and thousands of lives."

The two men nodded their heads like they understood, but it appeared they were more worried about getting chewed out again. Neither spoke.

Colonel Newton continued, "You said you had him along the river at Comfort. Now we have no idea where he is. I want to tell you both if he isn't in this jail or dead in the morning there are going to be changes. Do I make myself clear?" he sputtered. His spit arched from his mouth toward the two men. I don't know if it reached them, but they didn't say anything. A little bit of spit was a lot better than having that colonel chewing on their behinds.

My stomach rose up in my mouth. I was more afraid of talking to Colonel Newton than the spirits in Indian Cave. I was as afraid of him as I was the German POW.

There was no one else to do it. I had to save Dougie and catch the spy. I stepped out in the light.

"Sir, I know where the spy is." My voice broke like the time I was Joseph in the Christmas pageant.

“Who the hell is this?” Colonel Newton boomed.

I didn’t see how a man so short could talk so loud. I glanced around. I wasn’t the only one who was afraid of him.

Agent Tullar grabbed me and clutched me. His onion breath nearly knocked me out. “This is the reason we haven’t caught the spy. This boy has hampered the operation since its beginning.”

Colonel Newton looked down at me, his lip curled up in a snarl. “You mean a mere boy has held up your operation? It’s a good thing you didn’t find that Kraut spy. He would have whipped all of you.”

The FBI agent’s grip tightened on my shoulder. I had been blamed for everything else. Now I was being blamed for helping the Germans.

Colonel Newton’s voice softened. “What do you know, son?” He squatted down until his face was even with mine.

Agent Tullar was crushing my shoulders. I squirmed and tried to escape but he held me tight. “The spy is up in Indian Cave, I sputtered. “He’s holding Dougie captive.”

Colonel Newton’s jaw tightened. I could see why grown men cringed when he looked at them. “Where is Indian Cave?”

Officer Morris took me away from Agent Tullar. “Sir, this is the worst boy in Carrville. He has run off from his mother and is trying to create a diversion. Let me take him home.”

I was surprised Officer Morris knew what diversion meant, but I admired him for facing Colonel Newton. Officer Morris stepped back from the hard eyes. Colonel Newton looked back to me and nodded at Agent Tullar to let me go with Officer Morris.

As I walked off, I heard him say. "He's the only one who has come up with anything. I should listen to him."

As Officer Morris tried to pull me away, I balked. "Sir, they're going to Galveston to meet a U-boat. If someone doesn't get up there fast, they're going to kill Dougie."

The colonel watched Officer Morris drag me along the sidewalk to the police car. No one believed me. I could hear people muttering and laughing at me. It would serve them right if the spy got away.

Officer Morris tossed me into the patrol car. "Stay in there, Burr. I'm gonna get me a couple of sandwiches."

On the far side of the patrol car, Jefferson Street looked like a canal going into the dark. A streetlight broke the blackness at the corner of Jefferson and Earl Garrett. I slid across the seat and out the car door on the far side.

I had no idea what I was going to do, but I had to try to save Dougie. I wasn't interested in catching the spy or the POW. The soldiers could run all over Carr County looking for them, for all I cared, but Dougie was my friend.

My breath was coming in huge gasps when I trotted into Ranger Purvis's front yard. The lights were still on, but his Pontiac wasn't in the driveway. At least my luck was consistent. Bad.

I held my hand up to knock and remembered the sewage pit and the barrel. I slammed my fist on the door.

Mrs. Purvis answered the door. "Yes? Oh, hi, Burr. What can I do for you?" She wasn't pretty but she was as soft as Ranger Purvis was hard. Her pale blue eyes always

looked ready to laugh.

“Is Ranger Purvis here?” I asked.

“No.” She looked like she had this happen a lot.

“Can I leave him a note?”

I rolled the German belt buckle in the note I had scribbled and handed it to her.

“Give him this. My life and Dougie’s depend on him coming to help us.”

“Burr, shouldn’t you go to the authorities?” She sounded like she really cared.

I stopped and looked back. “They won’t believe me. Tell Ranger Purvis if I’m lying, I’ll dip out the city privy with my bare hands.”

“Burr, Burr....”

I wanted to run back to that warm voice and hide, but I had to help Dougie.

## Chapter Seventeen

### SNAKES TO THE RESCUE

Helping Dougie under any circumstances was difficult but getting Demmie's snake collection in a tow sack was almost more than I could handle.

Twice I had dropped the sack and lost two of the garter snakes. Good thing Demmie had lots of snakes in his cage. I grabbed a big gray water snake and plopped him into the sack. I was sure he was a water moccasin and could kill me, but I wasn't that lucky.

I slid number seventeen into the sack and trotted up Travis Street. Cold slick snakes banged against my leg, sending the willies all over me. I hated snakes. Demmie Watts was proof enough for me that only an idiot would collect them.

I turned up Golf Course Road and remembered all the times Dougie had humiliated me and beat me up. I must be the idiot. Demmie Watts was home in bed while I was going to take on the whole German Army with a sack of water snakes to save a guy



who had been beating me up since I was three.

It felt like I'd been running forever against the cold wind gusting up Bolyn Creek. A vehicle strained on the incline coming up the hill. If it was Ranger Purvis, I should get out in the road. If it was the U. S. Army guys, I'd better stay hidden.

Hidden won out. I let out my breath as a Jeep and a truck filled with angry-looking soldiers ground past. I looked up the gully. Moonlight reflected off the puddles of water collected in the bottom of the wash. Eight hours ago, Carr County was a dusty bowl, now it was a bog.

The snakes wiggled against my leg, but I didn't react as much as I had in the beginning. I was getting used to them. The whole idea of not reacting to snakes sent a chill up my back worse than the snakes had.

I was glad the moon had come out. It made my trip up the gully easier. The moon also made it easier for the Germans to see me. For every good thing there is a bad side. At least that's what Mother said. I thought of her at home alone, worrying about me and wished I hadn't left.

A large limestone rock rolled from under my feet and clattered down the gully. I gripped the sack and waited for it to stop. It didn't cause any reaction from the direction of the cave. The large water snake rolled past my bare leg, sending me scurrying up the gully. Those two Germans couldn't be any scarier than a snake wiggling against my leg.

The lights were so bright it looked like daylight in the cave. They were so sure of themselves they were having a party. I could hear them laughing and trying to sing "The Eyes of Texas" like Mr. Hausmann did when he was drunk.

That made me mad. They could ridicule the United States Army and the FBI, but

they were making fun of Texas.

A ridge that ran above the cave looked like a skinny hog's back humped up against Taylor Mountain. Rocks, stunted cedar trees and clumps of caliche poked at the stars.

The German national anthem boomed from the cave. I knew it was their national anthem because I'd heard it in a movie with Alan Ladd. That was too much. I scrambled up the ridge, slipping back but kept grunting forward until I squatted above the cave entrance. I had never noticed but the opening dipped up like a teapot spout.

I took a deep breath and stuck my hand in the tow sack. Snakes squirmed over my hand and wriggled up my arm. I almost fainted. If I'd had anything in my stomach, I would have puked it up. If I didn't find that big gray water snake soon, I was going home. The larger snake brushed against my arm. I twisted my hand around and grabbed him. He was strong as an alligator. He twisted up my arm and wrapped his body all the way up to my shoulder.

His beady eyes looked at me in the moonlight. I whispered, "I don't like this any better than you do but if you pull this off, I'll get you back to the creek and keep Demmie away from you forever."

I must have been going nuts, talking to a snake in the middle of the night on the side of a hill, with a tow sack full of snakes, getting ready to take on the whole German Army.

Then what sounded like a fight broke out in the cave. I held onto my friend and leaned out over the ridge. I opened the sack and emptied the wiggling snakes into the cave.

I tossed the sack behind me. I hoped Colonel Kurt Werner hadn't been lying about how much he hated snakes.

Screaming spewed from the cave. I couldn't understand it, but I was sure Colonel Werner was more excited about those snakes wriggling around the cave floor than he had been about invading Poland. It sounded like the Germans were a lot more frightened of Texas water snakes than they were of Colonel Newton's troops and our local law enforcement officers.

Kurt screamed like he had his toe in a combine. In spite of my tense situation, I giggled. A man big enough to wipe out the whole French Army was spooked by a few water snakes.

The screams from the cave changed to bellowing like the time Mr. Weidenfeld's Jersey bull got caught in the barbed-wire fence. At least the bull had some proof that he had been injured. I would bet the snakes never touched the Kraut.

I leaned out over the cave mouth as far as I could. The big German was stuck in the cave mouth. It sounded like he was crying for his mother. Reinhardt was trying to reason with Kurt and the POW quieted down.

I spit on the gray water snake for luck and tossed him down. As he fell, the big snake wriggled in the air like he was trying to gain his balance. Colonel Werner's attempt at being reasonable went south when the big snake clunked around the spy's neck. The water snake was trying to get away from the crazy man but got mixed up and coiled himself around the Kurt's neck.

I thought his screaming had been bad before when I dumped the smaller snakes in the cave, but he shifted into high gear. His bellowing echoed off a limestone cliff on the

other side of the road and sounded like a cow falling into a canyon. The more he jerked at the snake the tighter it coiled around his thick neck.

Suddenly SS Colonel Kurt Werner tipped over the edge of the cave and rolled down the hill. If I hadn't been so scared it would have been funny to watch a 250-pound German SS officer losing a fight to a five-foot Texas water snake.

The spy poked his head out of the cave and shouted down the gully in German, but the POW had all he could handle with that snake. There was enough moonlight that I saw Reinhardt shrug like he couldn't understand how a grown man, especially an SS colonel, could be that afraid of a water snake.

The spy slipped out of the cave and skidded down the gully-side to the wash. This wasn't much of a chance for me, but it was all I had. I had given up on the army, the FBI, the local cops and the Texas Rangers. If Dougie was going to get out, it was up to me.

I sucked in a deep breath and lay on my belly on the side of the wash above the cave. I turned loose of a cedar bush I'd been hanging onto and fell like a dove full of birdshot. I wished I had compared my descent to something less fatal, but before I could think of a better one, I plopped on the ground beside the cave entrance.

The spy had pried the snake off the POW and was trying to convince him that it was gone. It looked like the SS colonel was getting fed up with Reinhardt's criticism. He slammed the spy to the ground and put a chokehold on him that would make a professional wrestler proud.

I realized I was wasting time watching them fight. I sprang up and dove inside the cave. Water snakes wriggled all over the floor. For an instant I sided with the big SS colonel, then remembered the snakes were harmless.

Dougie hunched against the far wall, his hands and feet tied. I jerked the spy's knife out of my pocket and sprinted across the cave. I pulled the gag out of his mouth and wished I'd left it there.

"They're gonna kill me and I'm only twelve," he blubbered.

"You want me to stuff that back in your mouth and leave you with those Krauts?" He shook his head, and I sliced the knife through the ropes and set him free. I shoved him across the cave toward the small exit hole at the back. I grabbed the flashlight and the lantern.

He tried to twist away from me. "No," I said, "go through that hole."

Dougie blinked. "I'm not going in there with the Indian spirits."

I stuck my mouth close to his ear. "The Krauts are coming back up the bank. If you don't crawl through that hole, I'm going to leave you with them and let them kill you."

Dougie whipped his head around. We could hear the men approaching the mouth of the cave. I shoved him aside and slid into the dark behind him. I sure could understand how Dougie felt, but I wasn't going to let that Kraut catch me. The light from the gasoline lantern, which had been so bright in the front room, didn't come with us.

Dougie was blubbering, but he slid along in the dark with me. I flipped on the flashlight, and he began to whale at the endless black outside the light beam.

He was trying to crawl up the wall to the ceiling. If I got too close to him, I was afraid he'd grab me and pull us both over the edge. It looked like he was paralyzed on the ledge. The Germans couldn't get to him but while they tried, maybe I could find some help.

Mother had told me that bad boys went to Hell, but she never said it would be so soon. I promised her Methodist God and Mrs. Sutton, my Sunday school teacher, that I would be good forever and ever if they got us out of this mess.

I scraped my knees on the rough limestone climbing up to the hole in the roof. Stars sparkled overhead and never looked so good.

The two Germans exploded when they realized Dougie was gone. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but they weren't happy. It sounded like they were taking turns blaming each other. I could have told the little one he was going to get in trouble.

As I pulled up out of the exit, I heard the little one scream and the box splinter. I might be a hick kid, but I had a German spy and the escaped SS Colonel Kurt Werner, which the army and the FBI couldn't find, fighting with each other.

Dogie wailed from his perch on the ledge. The fighting stopped. If that goose had kept quiet, we'd have been all right.

I leaned back to the hole. "Shut up, Dogie. I'm going for help."

"I'm scared," he bellowed.

I stood over the opening. "So am I," I said, "but crying won't help. Now shut up or I'll tell the Indian sprits to get you."

He shut up, but I could hear him whimpering in the dark. I felt like the big Kraut; my buddy was less than helpful.

I skidded down the gully wall and skipped over the rocks toward the road. The Germans sounded like they were trying to get Dougie and me out of the cave. They might be the "master race" but they were having a tough time with a kid from the Texas Hill Country.

I stopped at the road. The army had burned half the gas in Texas driving up and down this road, but now that I needed them, they were off somewhere drinking coffee and eating sandwiches with Officer Morris.

I had no way to signal. If I could build a fire out in the open, I might get someone's attention. The problem was that everything was wet, but I kept looking. I finally found a huge collection of wood from the big flood of three years ago. It was wrapped around a live oak tree.

I pulled the outer limbs and trash away. The inside was dry. It was a good fire starter, but it wouldn't be enough to attract the attention I needed. Across the wash a dead cedar tree swayed in the gusting wind.

I dragged the dry trash to the cedar tree and piled it around the base. I had one chance to get help. After that, the Germans were going to be coming after my hide and they'd be mad as a run over dog.

The dry cedar bark smelled like a fall afternoon. I held the kitchen match under the starter and watched the orange flame burst up the driftwood. Wind off the creek blew the fire up the dry cedar and ignited the entire tree. I stepped back and admired my work. The flames danced and spit, sending up plenty of smoke.

Rocks rattled down the wash, setting a warning bell to clattering in my head. That was the big SS officer coming for me and he wasn't going to take me on a picnic. The fact that I had made him look like a fool was bad enough, but the snakes were the last nail in my coffin.

Limbs slapped my face as I scrambled up the ridge running above the cave entrance. The colonel yelled instructions in German to his spy friend and I doubted it was

to get me a Christmas present.

The spy ran along the wash, carrying the rifle. They were getting serious. If they killed me there was no one who could find Dougie and get him out.

I heard the Kraut throw a shell into the chamber. I wanted to look back, but I was afraid I'd panic and fall off the narrow ridge.

Fire exploded from the rifle barrel and caliche dirt blew up in my face. Another inch and it would have been my head blowing up. I slipped to the other side of the ridge, but the black canyon seemed to reach up at me. If I went too far, I would fall to the boulders along Bolyn Creek. I fought the urge to climb up the ridge to see what the German was doing.

German cursing and rocks clattering off the ridge into the canyon below answered my question. I wished I hadn't asked. I was better off not knowing.

By the light of the flaming cedar tree, I saw the big German scrambling up the ridge toward me. He didn't have his rifle, but I doubted he'd need it.

I ignored the blackness of the canyon yawning at me and hobbled along the ridge like an armadillo with bad feet. I knew from the sound of the falling rocks that he was gaining on me. I should have gone home and let Dougie take care of himself.

From the wash the sweetest four words I had ever heard caressed my ears. "Halt! Purvis, Texas Rangers!"

A rifle shot was followed instantly by three forty-five automatic shots, then silence except for the German SS officer hauling up the ridge after me.

I turned to look back. My foot slipped. My stomach jerked into my throat as I fell over the edge.



On the way down, I grabbed a small cedar bush. It might be small, but it looked big as a red wood tree under the circumstances. I looked below at the total blackness. I could hear rocks ricocheting off the boulders below.

How soon would I join them?

## Chapter Eighteen

### THE CLIFFHANGER

The big German SS officer stood over me and grinned. He saluted and trotted off up the ridge. Ranger Purvis had shot the spy at the cave and although he was a great Texas Ranger, foot travel was not his strong suit. Coming up that muddy slope was going to be slow going for him.

Sweat covered my hands and they began to slip. There was no way I could hang on. I considered letting go but remembered Mother saying if you reach the end of your rope tie a knot and hold on. I couldn't get both hands on the cedar bush and knew I couldn't tie a knot in it even if I could.

A shadow fell over me and blotted out the moon. The big German officer laughed and grabbed my wrist. He jerked me up onto the ridge and plopped me down.

He had come back to get me. I didn't understand. Was he going to kill me?

He said, "You are a worthy foe and shouldn't die like that. Take care." He saluted and turned to leave.

"Don't move. Purvis, Texas Ranger." Purvis's voice was low and hard as cold

steel.

The big German turned and smiled. The moonlight struck the Luger in his belt.

Purvis said, "Don't go for it. I'll have to kill you if you do." It wasn't anything like the movies. These two men were getting ready to kill each other on a hill outside of Carrville. For real.

Colonel Kurt Werner grinned and grabbed for the pistol. Fire flashed from the barrel of Purvis's .45. The big gun rocked two more times.

The German struggled to raise the Luger, then smiled and fell down the wash to the rocks below.

I had hated him and wanted to kill him, but he had saved my life. He wanted to kill thousands of American soldiers, but there was something special about him. He was truly magnificent.

I sat on the ground and sniffed, trying to swallow a cry. "He s-saved my life," I stammered.

Purvis pushed the toe of his boot against my leg. "Yes, he did. He was a brave man. I had the drop on him, but he still tried to do what he came here to do."

The wind blew over the hills, sending sparks from the still burning cedar tree flying over the golf course. "I thought they were all bad."

Purvis reached down and lifted me to my feet. "There is some good and some bad on both sides."

When we got back to town, Dougie was telling all the locals and Agent Tullar how he saved me from the spy and killed the man himself. I pulled the scratchy army blanket around me and sipped on the K-ration hot chocolate. I must have been starving to

drink it.

Colonel Newton stood over me. "Are you Burr Hobbs?"

I tried to think of how to avoid admitting what I had done, but it was so much I gave up. "Yes, sir."

His granite face split into the biggest grin I'd ever seen. "Son, you just saved two years off the war and probably a million men."

I couldn't think of an answer, so I sipped the cocoa.

"What would you like?" he asked.

Without thinking I answered, "A hamburger."

"You got it. Simmons, come here!" Colonel Newton yelled.

Lieutenant Simmons trotted across the rocks. "Yes, sir?"

Colonel Newton glared at him. "Get this boy a hamburger, fries and a chocolate shake."

Lieutenant Simmons whined, "Where, sir?"

Colonel Newton leaned up closer to the bigger man's face. "I don't know, but if there isn't a hamburger up here in fifteen minutes you will be standing guard duty as a private in the Aleutians until this war is over."

I didn't like Lieutenant Simmons, but I did feel sorry for him. There wasn't a place this side of San Antonio that could fix a hamburger this time of night

Colonel Newton leaned down to me. "Son, the government can't give you an award for what you did out there, but I want you to have something."

"What?" I asked.

He handed me a medal that captured the light.

He smiled and looked like a cherub without hair. "It's a medal I won in France, but you were much braver than I was."

I twisted the medal in the air. "What is it?"

Colonel Newton said, "It's the Congressional Medal of Honor."

The End